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## MYSTERIOUS COURIER

King Louis XV of France is determined to learn the details of a certain secret Russian treaty; but one after another his special envoys are betrayed and thrown into the icy dungeon of Schlussembourg by Elizabeth of Russia. Any messenger sent to renew the attempt is virtually doomed to die by knout or garrotting.—

One man might bring off the coup—Chevalier d'Eon. Brilliant swordsman and redoubtable gambler, with steel-cold reserves of nerve and wit—all belied by the fresh good looks and slight figure of a boyish young girl! Send him as the enchanting young Mademoiselle de Beaumont—and as the King has good cause to know, Eon disguised can deceive even the most practised judge. In such a role the shrewd young Chevalier will quickly win a way into the unsuspecting graces of Russian Ministers—of the Empress herself!

The Chevalier reflects gleefully that the ruse will also speed him into the unsuspecting graces of many a fair lady of the Russian Court. Faced with the grimmest of danger if he is once suspected, he sets out undaunted, in the guise of a fashionable young woman, with the boorish but formidable Douglas as his escort—to run the gauntlet of wolves, Cossacks, jealous women and lustful men, attack and treachery from every quarter.



# MYSTERIOUS COURIER

by GILBERT AULLEN

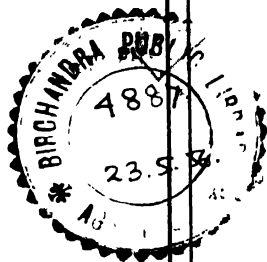


*an episode in the  
fantastic career of  
Chevalier d'Eon*



translated by

LIONEL SMITH-GORDON



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# MYSTERIOUS COURIER



## CHAPTER I

# The Madcaps

IT WAS FEBRUARY 1755. The eve of carnival. There had been masquerades at the Opera ever since the eleventh of November. All Paris throbbed with excitement at the prospect of the frolics and the din which would strike to the furthest corners of the dingy old houses that opened on to some of the narrow streets, muddier and more noisome here than elsewhere. The street of Saint Antoine, headquarters of the Shrovetide merry-making, was getting ready to devise the most extravagant fooleries and to fashion the strangest, most whimsical and grotesque disguises for all but the miserly or sanctimonious. It was a time to jest at the expense of doctors and attorneys, apothecaries and beadles, and all other enemies of dancing and singing; it was a time for the city to be thronged with gods, demi-gods and heroes, shepherds and shepherdesses, nymphs and dryads, parading in their fabled costumes. The girls of the Palais-Royal and others of their kind looked to get their share of the wind-fall, as did the innkeepers, the tavern proprietors, the café-owners, the keepers of restaurants and chop-houses, the flute-players and hurdy-gurdy men, the pipers, the drummers, the sellers of cardboard masks and the old clothes men, those great providers of carnival fripperies. A fever ran through the town, consuming the giddy, especially the women, who felt in every limb a wanton urge to pleasure before the sharp encounter with the rigours of Lent, with its blasting reminders of a wrath to come which, they well knew they must resign themselves to hear—but for which, thank God, there was time enough yet.

In a lodging in the street called Buci, behind the College of the Four Nations, which had been founded under the terms of Cardinal Mazarin's will, two men—obviously two gentlemen—seemed on that morning to be giving little heed to the carnival or to the great ball which the King was to give at Versailles to mark its opening. The room smelt of wine, of food, of women,

of scent and of tobacco. In the dim light of a grey winter's morning it appeared both luxurious and dirty. In one corner was an alcove screened with purple damask. Long, somewhat heavy curtains hung from the tester of a bed on which there sported little angels, richly carved in wood and gilt. The only other furnishings of the room consisted of a Regency chest whose half-open drawers revealed a jumble of linen in none too good repair, an Italian sideboard in black and red marquetry, an oval table and a few chairs. The sideboard was ringed from the bottoms of bottles and shiny with great goutts of grease, and the table, at that moment covered with plates and dishes holding the remains of a meal of cold meat and fruit, was also loaded with Bohemian wineglasses flanked by empty decanters. Thus one might conclude, without guessing at what was hidden in the alcove whose curtains remained so scandalously drawn at this late hour, that the master of the place had unstintingly devoted the night to drunkenness and debauchery.

This master must, so far as one might judge, be the tall and well-fashioned gentleman with exhaustion in his face and melancholy in his eyes who at this moment, sunk in an armchair, was yawning in a way which seemed to threaten a dislocated jaw. He was in his shirt and bedroom slippers, with great wine-stains on his sleeves and his wig askew, and he was gazing with an air of much surprise at his coat which lay on another chair among the garments of a woman, while his sword had slipped to the ground, splitting the carpet. He lay rather than sat in his chair, with one leg over its arm, and he was gently swinging this leg, as though he had not the energy to attempt anything more strenuous.

The young man facing him was in complete contrast to him. He sat upright with his chest thrown out and his head held high, and he had altogether the air of an early-morning visitor who must have spent the night, if not in study or meditation, at least sleeping in a virtuous bed. He seemed however to be quite at home in this den of debauchery, yet his eye was clear, his collar correct and his sleeve neatly spread over the back of his hand, and he seemed to be pained by the sight of so much disorder.

"It's a dog's life, this," he said. "I've had enough of versifying

and begging favour. . . . The Palace—faugh! I shall never be happy in it. There must be some means to get away from it, to succeed . . .”

His voice was gentle, almost feminine, but well controlled.

“Do you think I don’t know all that?”

“Ha—du Barry! You are a Count—you have your chateau and your lands.”

“Call them that if you must. To me—a shanty in the backwoods. Just enough to give a meagre living to the wife whom I have left there among a bickering mob of old hags. And here I have debts I can no longer reckon, wagon-loads of debts, enough to drive a creditor to distraction. Oh, I know this is common enough among gentlemen, but with me it’s what I’m best at—it’s the one thing for which I have a genius. Luckily, the gaming tables are always there. Thanks be for the Hotel du Transylvanie, my daily gold-mine!”

But the other was not listening. “My father always said,” he muttered, “that the lawyer’s gown was the only wear. I choose the sword. . . . But who will give me my commission? Who will make a guardsman of the Chevalier d’Eon?”

“Pooh! You are only a pretty boy,” said du Barry in a tone at once affectionate and patronizing, and with that he laughed.

The Chevalier d’Eon leapt to his feet. He kicked away a bottle which rolled under the bed and planted himself squarely in front of du Barry with a grimace of rage. His whole small body shook like a fighting cock when its feathers rise in fury and like the cock he bristled and seemed to hurl himself at the enemy with the light of battle in his eye. “Sdeath! Is that all I am?”

Without moving from his easy position, Count Jean du Barry, nicknamed ‘the Roué,’ offered him a profound but ironical salute, using both hands and head for the purpose. “No, by my faith, Chevalier, you are also a poet who has the honour to collaborate with the Prince de Conti; you ride like a centaur and wield a sword like a god.”

“Very well, then . . .”

“Oh yes, I own you my master in arms—and I’ve no wish to cross swords with you, for you would pin me to the wall before I’d time to recommend to God the soul which is promised to

Satan's turnspit. This I own. But, all the same, you're a pretty boy."

Eon had let his head fall back on his chest; he was suddenly smaller than ever again and he made a grimace which had it come from the lips of a pretty girl, accentuated by a patch at the corner of her mouth, would have been adorable. But, by comparison with the Gascon nobleman whose smile lit up his whole fine and expressive features, little d'Eon could not figure as a handsome man. 'Pretty boy' was indeed the word. Imagine him as a person of not more than five feet six and thin as a rail, otherwise perfectly proportioned, with small hands, small feet, a beautiful head held as high as could be, silken fair hair, great blue eyes, a mouth of the finest shape, a straight nose, rounded cheeks—in fine, as his friends would say, the very figure of Love.

"Ah! What wouldn't I give," he said, "to have your shoulders and to be able to look down on people from your height."

His voice was almost pitiful. He passed his hand over his chin. Never in his life had he shaved. Seen in a certain light his face seemed to have a light down on the cheeks. Many a woman had as much. And his skin, which was of the whitest, was astonishingly smooth.

"Don't get upset," said the Roué, and stepping behind him he suddenly seized Eon by the waist and joined the fingers of his two hands round it. "You have . . ."

He did not finish. With a thrust whose violence proved the strength pent up in this frail-seeming body, Eon hurled him head over heels into the further corner of the room, and drawing his sword cried: "*En garde!*"

"Go to the Devil," said du Barry, seizing a pillow which lay near him and using it as a shield. "You're mad. Would you kill a man on the ground?"

"If you don't get up, I'll pin you to the floor."

The other laughed till he was out of breath. He knew all about his friend's sudden outbursts of rage, but, even so, he was uneasy under his threatening scowl. He was searching for a proper answer without success when the door opened to admit four gentlemen, who burst in together and stopped in surprise at the sight of one man on the floor and another holding a drawn sword.



"What is this?" cried one of them. "A duel?"

"Not yet," answered Eon, his voice high pitched but angry. "But I will soon make him fight me."

Just at this moment the tousled head of a girl appeared from behind the bedcurtains and gazed at the scene with astonished eyes.

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen," cried du Barry, "the man is mad. Call the monks from Charenton to treat him . . ."

Eon was beside himself. He ground his teeth. His eyes shot flames. He pushed his sword right into the other man's face. The Roué, accustomed as he was to the little man's furies, was beginning to feel frightened. Then the position was reversed as the other four laid hold of Eon and, in spite of his kicking and struggling, threw him back into his chair and held him there with shouts and laughter as if they were dealing with a bear escaped from its leader.

"Which has been insulted?"

"I have," shouted Eon, throwing off his captors' grip.

"Gentlemen," said Jean du Barry, leaping to his feet. "You shall be my judges. If only two of you find that I have insulted the Chevalier, I am willing to give satisfaction."

"Agreed, agreed," cried all four. "Tell us what happened." And they assumed the serious air of those heavily bewigged councillors of state who, from their benches in the Palace, ponder at length obscure points of law. Eon shrugged his shoulders, relaxed his muscles, freed himself without violence and pushed his sword back into its scabbard.

"I told our friend here," explained the Roué, "that he was a pretty boy."

Lauraguais broke in, "But it would be an insult to say less."

"And I was tactless enough, in trying to prove my point, to take his waist between my hands. Like this."

He moved forward and Eon lunged at him, but was held back by the two beside him.

"There was no insult there—to my thinking at least," said the Roué as he recoiled a step or two.

"I believe I've done something of the same sort myself, by way of joke," added Lauraguais, and the three others cried together: "So have I . . . and I . . . and I . . ."

"Oh yes, I know," said Eon. "I have a small waist—everyone knows it, but I am tired of being told so."

"Well, get yourself a mistress," said du Barry. "Her waist will be smaller than yours, and then we will all keep quiet."

And another asked, "Doesn't Madame de Rochefort love you?"

All five began to laugh at this. Mme de Rochefort was a fair young woman, agreeable and distinguished. For months Eon had been her gallant. Now he blushed: "I'd be obliged," he said dryly, "if you would not speak of Mme de Rochefort in a way to offend me."

There he was, all ready to work himself up into a rage again. Lauraguais opened his arms and spoke soothingly: "All in good time. Let the Chevalier have time to spread his wings."

At which Sainte-Foy announced in tones of admiration: "Meanwhile, you know, a week has passed already since he killed his man." And Besenval added, "One of the bodyguard, he was, who played the same prank as du Barry. And for that he met his death."

All the men leaned over their little friend in a manner that was somewhat familiar perhaps, but in no way offensive.

Eon looked up at the five heads inclined towards him. In his mind he knew very well that all his friends valued him as a man of wit and honour, a master of both horse and sword.

"Is it peace again?" asked du Barry, and Eon answered with a peal of laughter. The others were already shouting with joy and Sainte-Foy, seizing du Barry by the shoulders, hissed in his ear, "Poor Roué, you've had a narrow escape. I should have been heartbroken by your death, you great lady-killer!"

"But what have we here?" said one of them, pointing to the face which was still gazing through the curtains at the scene, but smiling now, with the smile of an easy-natured wench delighted to see good humour restored.

"Pah!" As du Barry strode towards it the face disappeared in haste, but the man tore the curtains apart and revealed a naked girl, bridling and remonstrating as she wrapped herself in the sheets with all the airs of an outraged nun.

"Look how chaste she is," cried the Roué. "Will you leave those sheets alone, you silly girl." And he dragged her out by

the hand, by the head and finally by both arms, till she stood upright in front of them, still playing a comedy of modesty, for, as she did not know what to do with her arms, she fell artlessly into the pose of the Venus of Cnidos, one hand here, the other there. She had long legs, exquisitely long thighs, and jutting breasts, and under a soft-seeming skin, a light layer of fat. Still scarcely awake, she began to laugh, inwardly pleased with herself and, whether from tact, from gratitude or from fear, she looked only at her lover of the night before.

"What do you think of her?" asked the Roué. "Come along," he went on, addressing the girl, "show us your paces."

She came forward a few steps as they made way for her, walking with the supple movements of a dancer, and now her hesitant fingers were twined in her flowing hair.

"I found her at La Bordas' place," explained the Roué.

La Bordas was one of the tenants of the Palais-Royal, whose business it was to supply pretty girls to all who wanted them—noblemen and business-men alike. The Roué was on the best of terms with her. Unkind rumour had it that he was her partner in the business, bringing to great men the goods which they were too idle to search out for themselves, that this was his greatest source of income, and that, gamester in general, he played pimp when it suited him.

The men, with shining eyes, examined her like connoisseurs. "Pretty legs," said one. "Lovely arms," remarked another.

Du Barry meanwhile was turning the girl round, revealing a beautiful back and rounded shoulders. Her narrow waist ran down to well-proportioned hips on whose curves the morning light sparkled gaily. All of them had the same impulse—to compare the girl's waist with Eon's. But they dared not say so and only two or three furtive glances were cast towards the Chevalier.

"The line of the back is delicious," commented Lauraguais.

"Not a fault, no fault at all," murmured Sainte-Foy as if he were judging a horse. And he whistled in admiration.

"Now laugh!" ordered du Barry.

She dropped her shoulders a little, lowered her head and showed her small white teeth, and from her charming mouth the laughter gushed. But it was too high-pitched, too shrill, too

crude, the harshest of outbursts. The men looked at one another. What depths of vulgarity were hidden in that lovely throat! It was the laughter of a gutter-snipe, and hearing it, they suddenly realized faults of bearing that offended them.

"With its mouth shut, a splendid filly," said Lauraguais, stifling a yawn. "But when it talks it has to be judged by human standards. A fine animal—no more!"

"Someone give me a whip!" cried the Roué savagely. Taking the girl by the shoulders, he spun her round. "Do you hear?"

He pushed her roughly, crying as she went into the next room and then, raking together her clothes and stays and shoes, he flung them at her and slammed the door.

"I had dreamed that that creature would meet the case," said the Roué, as if speaking to himself. "But not so." Then, turning to the others, "I'll manage it somehow, mark my words! Yes, somehow, by Heaven, I must find something young, virginal, delicate, charming, a rosebud among the roses . . ." He broke off; but after a few seconds, resumed, ". . . for you know, gentlemen, the King is a connoisseur . . ."

There were four gasps, but in all of these not one suggestion of repugnance. Surprise there was, astonishment, but nothing more. The attention of all four was fixed and their eyes bore eagerly on the Roué, as did the wide blue eyes of Eon. At last the discussion had taken a turn which really interested the Chevalier; the little man had a passion for political intrigue. Could it be possible, he asked himself, that the Roué, whom all the world took to be mere roysterer, was capable of aiming so high?

"How much longer have we to put up with that she-devil of a Pompadour, that shop-soiled favourite, that wrinkled queen of the harem? Do you know that she has the most disgusting defects?"

"Maurepas says so in his verses," chuckled Sainte-Foy, puffing out his cheeks.

"She is sick—burned up by a horrible fever."

"She will infect the King with her disease."

"We must get rid of her."

They were all talking at once, scowling and savage, snatching

and snapping, like a pack of curs, at the Marquise's soft white body.

"By my faith," said Lauraguais, "if all you wish is to play a trick like that on the woman, you may count on me, du Barry."

"And on me," cried each of the other three in turn.

Du Barry shrugged his shoulders: "I keep on looking, but so far I am getting nowhere. You see, if we are to get rid of her, we must find a girl of reasonable family to take her place. She must be married . . . or at any rate it would be better if she were. She must be well-bred. 'That creature'—he pointed at the door—"is a slut. Our girl must be able to walk, to dance, to smile, to talk—in general to make the most of herself. After all, gentlemen, we must remember that she has to make her appearance at Versailles, the greatest stage in the world. In truth we are looking for a white blackbird!"

The point was easily taken, and they all started to advise and encourage him, interrupting their eloquence with bursts of laughter, for they were a light-hearted bunch of Frenchmen, who were not in the habit of taking anything too seriously. Heaven knows, they agreed, Paris is full of pretty women. But du Barry was not easily persuaded. There were plenty such, he agreed, but some were virtuous, others did not care for that kind of fun; some were closely kept by lovers and others so keenly watched by their families that it would be an expensive business to win them over. After all, one must not let oneself be robbed.

"Why don't you try the Court?" asked someone.

The Court? Du Barry shrugged again. First of all, the women of the Court had no need of his services to put themselves forward, and then each one of them had a family behind her only too willing to thrust her into the royal bed, with a lively hope of title and office and the pleasant feel of gold; and Louis XV had still only too keen a memory of Mme de Nesles and her sisters. No, it was no good looking among the noble ladies of the Court for a beauty fit to oust the Pompadour. As for the women of the bourgeoisie, it was impossible to catch them at exactly the right moment. As soon as they got married they began to fade very quickly, what with their children and their house-keeping. Between the time when they were mature and the

time when they were engrossed in their husbands and resigned to domestic slavery there was only a moment, gone in a flash. How could one seize upon it? And yet, this Pompadour, when one came to consider her, was nothing so wonderful. A chattering bird of a woman. A shoddy great lady. Nothing but skin and bone. No bosom and nothing under her petticoats. And anyhow the King was tired of her.

"Agreed. But she is in possession. And she is bolstered up by those who depend on her favour—her relations, above all her brother. She is no more now than a good friend of the King, but she is . . ." Du Barry paused for the right words.

"Well, say it," said Lauraguais. "She is no longer the King's mistress, but she is mistress of the kingdom. Gentlemen," he added, "we can, we must, find someone to replace her. Such a person must exist. For Heaven's sake, let us wake up. We are men of experience. As soon as we find the bird, du Barry will push the matter to a conclusion. We are all agreed on that, aren't we? The first of us who finds someone fit for the purpose will give the signal; we'll all rally round and so will depompadourize France!"

For several minutes the room was full of laughter. They saw the thing as done—and this new verb, to depompadourize, delighted them. The only one who showed no excitement was Eon. Behind the impassive mask of his face anyone who could penetrate his real feelings would have found uppermost a genuine sense of disgust. The Roué's lodging, with its alcove, now open and empty, its remnants of stale food, its overturned bottles and the clothes strewn at random on the floor, repelled him utterly. He felt ill at ease in such surroundings. He was angry with himself for keeping company with these hard, cynical, pleasure-seeking men. True enough, you could not have a Court without courtiers, and all of them were like this in greater or less degree. But Eon dreamed of a spirit in sympathy with his own, and in fact he had one such in Mme de Rochefort. These fools had just been speaking of her as they would of one of their own mistresses, but to him she showed herself as being of infinite tenderness. He never imagined her as being capable of holding any deeper feelings towards him, and for his own part he would have blushed to speak to her in

terms of love, although he was deeply troubled when she passed her lovely hands with an intimate gesture through his silky hair. Shaking his head at the ribald talk of his friends, he thought to himself that she at least would play no part in their shameful game.

"What is our Eon thinking about?" asked Lauraguais with a smile.

"About the Bastille," said Eon very clearly.

A long and uneasy silence followed this remark. The Bastille was a word which struck fear into even the most insolent of men, and more than one who would have braved all manner of death by sword or poison for the sake of a witty jest shivered with horror at the mere thought of being welcomed to its gates by the King's lieutenant and his governor.

"Pah!" cried the Roué. "The game is worth the candle."

The girl, now dressed again, banged on the door. Du Barry laid hold of her without ado and passed her on to the others, who rumbled her and tickled her so that she nearly collapsed in laughter on the first steps of the staircase.

"Goodbye, Felicie! 'Till to-night at La Bordas'. We'll come there four at a time, a dozen at a time, a hundred at a time. With the King's guard, the Swiss soldiers and the police!"

The door banged. Felicie's laugh could still be heard, to the accompaniment of the click-clack of her high heels on the steps. Clearly she was nothing but a whore from the Palais-Royal. With a wave of the hand, they banished all recollection of her from their minds when Lauraguais cried in his high-pitched voice: "Gentlemen, let us talk of serious things. To-night there is a fancy-dress ball at Versailles. Naturally, we shall all be there."

"I," said Besenval, "shall be a bear. As a Swiss, it is my duty. And if I am recognized that cannot be helped."

"And I," said Sainte-Foy, "shall be a Persian."

Dampierre chose to be a Turk, Lauraguais a Negro, and as for du Barry, "I have here," he said, "the trappings to make me into a Hungarian."

"What of the Chevalier?" The question came from all five at once. And at the moment of putting it, all five men burst out laughing.

"Please don't get angry again, Chevalier," said Lauraguais, "only think of the wonderful entrance you could make at this great ball where the King will be . . ."

And, stepping aside from the others and speaking very clearly, he went on: ". . . Escorted by a Turk, a Persian, a Hungarian and a Negro and led by a bear, comes, protected by a mask, the most beautiful lady in the world. . . ."

Eon blushed. The great craze of the day was for dressing up and, in his pranks with his friends, he had got into the habit of disguising himself as a woman. Small and slender, with better-shaped arms than those of many women, he had been the target of the most extravagant flattery. His first instinct had been to say, "I shall go as a guardsman." But the others would have protested, "What a silly idea! Anybody can be a guardsman. But a pretty woman—that is something rare." He did not want to seem to back out and, though he cast a murderous look at du Barry, as much as to say, "You again, getting me into trouble," he finally muttered: "Very well."

He said it grudgingly enough, but this did not upset his five friends, who raised a loud, triumphant clamour, enough to frighten everyone in the house. "Hurrah! Let us all embrace the Chevalier!"

They rushed downstairs in a body. But on the landing du Barry held back Lauraguais for a moment. "Lebel," he said, "will do anything for you."

Lebel was the first gentleman of the King's bedchamber, and ministered to his personal pleasures. He was known as Monsieur le Premier, and while he was only too ready to treat the petty squires, the upstarts and the rabble of the courtiers like dogs, for families like the Brancas (Lauraguais was the son and heir of the Duke of that name) he was all subservience.

"Yes, that's true," answered Lauraguais.

"Well then," murmured the Roué, "please tell him that there will be at the ball the prettiest girl in Paris, led by a bear, and that I am responsible for her dances."

At the first words, Lauraguais was dumbfounded. Then he gave a violent start.

"Tell him that, I beg you," repeated du Barry. "I have a plan of my own."



"I cannot understand you. You would be offering the King a terrible insult."

"I still ask you to tell him."

"And a few minutes ago you were talking about the Bastille. Poor Chevalier! You are making a bad bargain for him."

"My dear friend," said du Barry, with some impatience, "let me manage the campaign in my own way. Have we not set ourselves to depompadourize France? The word is your own."

"But, by using Eon?"

"I ask you to give me a free hand."

Lauraguais looked searchingly at the Count. This great devil of a Gascon made his will felt. He was quite calm and his gaze was clear and determined. Lauraguais shrugged his shoulders. "Very well, I will tell Lebel."

After this they walked together in silence as far as the Pont-Neuf. There, amidst the uproar of jugglers and mountebanks, of teeth-drawers and recruiting sergeants who exhibited huge sausages on bayonet-points to encourage the customers, they separated. Lauraguais and the others went on to the Palais-Royal. Du Barry turned off towards the Marais. Eon, thinking of the Prince de Conti whom he visited every day to bandy verses, went with du Barry as far as the end of the road.

## CHAPTER II

### First Appearance

"HAVEN'T YOU FINISHED yet?" cried Mme de Rochefort. "Is it as difficult as that to put on a petticoat? You will make us all think that we work a miracle every morning!" She laughed whole-heartedly as she stood among du Barry and the rest of them. By this time the Duc de Nivernais had joined the gang. He was going as a Spaniard and was already strumming on his guitar, with his knee bent in the proper style.

"He will never be finished," said one, and another shouted, "Eon! Eon!"

"We are like a lot of peacocks screaming," said the Duke. "What the devil, Chevalier, have you lost your tongue?"

"There he is at last."

And from the little room where he had shut himself in, Eon appeared as a most ravishing young woman, in camisole and petticoat, with his stockings well pulled up and his feet encased in the Countess's bedroom slippers. Everyone greeted him with rapturous approval. No doubt they had expected something very good, a successful disguise which might deceive an ordinary man. But this was the real thing; it took their breath away. It was useless to try to find any trace of the man in this ingenuous young girl; all that had been hidden away with a graceful gesture. Face, body, arms, hands, feet, even the bust itself, were feminine to a marvellous degree. Certainly the back was a little too straight, but there are women who are made like that. The only weak spot was the bosom.

"To complete the picture, Chevalier, you will have to have a false bosom." -

"Two oranges," suggested the Duke.

Mme de Rochefort protested, "What a horrible idea! What woman would dare to do such a thing?"

"Not you, certainly, Madame," said the Duke with a little pirouette. "And for very good reason."



She shook her finger at him. Anything else that was said was smothered in the laughter of the company.

"The stays will put everything right," said the Countess.

"Ah, yes," agreed Lauraguais. "Stays nowadays give full allure to what little is there. That is just another way of deceiving us poor men."

He made an impudent gesture. Meanwhile a lady's maid had risked approaching this petticoated person in whom she still recognized the dear, eternal enemy. Blushing and confused, far more so than her mistress, she had helped Eon to put on the stays and she was now busily engaged in lacing them up.

"Put your knee in his back," advised Sainte-Foy.

"The gentleman hardly needs it," answered the maid, looking at Eon's waist.

"Impudent hussy," laughed Mme de Rochefort, and added to Eon, "Don't puff yourself out, Chevalier."

"He is doing what the horses do when their bellybands are put on," commented Besenval.

"I am half-dead," said Eon, gaping desperately like a fish which has just been taken out of the water.

But, nevertheless, he looked very much at his ease. The stays showed off his waist to admiration. It was true that his hips were too slender and his buttocks unnoticeable, and the maid frowned at such a lack of attractions, but after all the paniers would hide all that. The question of the chest was more troublesome.

"Oh, well!" said du Barry, "the girl is flat-chested, that's all. Look! . . ." (he called the others to him and would have laid hands on Eon if the Chevalier had not held him off). "One must admit that there is something to be seen, a shadow between two breasts."

"Yes, there is just something," admitted the others with much nodding of heads, "as you say, a mere shadow." And all of them pressed forward to offer their services in holding the gown, the head-dress and so forth.

"For my part, I want to put on the shoes," said Sainte-Foy, kneeling in front of the chair on which Eon was now seated.

There was a scratching at the door. "I am not at home,"

cried the Countess. Laughter answered her and she hurried on with the business.

"The most important thing is the hair. Come along, Chevalier, kneel down."

On his knees before her, with his hands grasping the chair and almost hidden in the dress of the woman he worshipped, Eon was enveloped in her pungent scent. The Countess combed, separated, stroked his hair then took hold of it again to spread it out, curl it and spread it out again. Conscious that he must not say a word, Eon found himself terribly ill at ease. For the first time in his life he was in the grip of a profound emotion. Until that moment he had remained uninterested in women, a most unusual thing in an age when woman was the central point of everything. But now, at the Countess's feet, he felt ready to faint with pleasure. Taking advantage of a moment when the others were at a little distance, he murmured, "Oh, Madame," in a choking voice. But the Countess could not think of him as anything but her Cherub, and all she answered was "What is it?" and then, more plainly, "What does the little man want? Now, hold still a minute and it will all be finished."

"Oh," said he again, still whispering. "Why am I not alone with you?"

For a moment she thought that she must have misheard him, then she bent over him and said, in a low voice, "But, my dear Chevalier, what are you thinking of?"

The others were all chattering away and busying themselves with handling the clothes. The Countess released Eon who rose to his feet, with burning cheeks. She herself was embarrassed and annoyed with herself.

"You must admit, Madame," said the Duke in her ear, "that anyone might be deceived."

The Countess tossed her head as if to say, "Yes, I can see the danger for us all!" Eon was looking at her as one woman may look at another. He realized that in this disguise he could allow himself the sort of glances which would have been insolent if offered by a man, and could indulge in the sighs which would have seemed a little excessive in a young man but came quite naturally to a girl. Mme de Rochefort by this time did not know what to think or what to say. "Is that really

my Cherub?" she asked herself. She was frightened by her handiwork. "If I let him go, what may he not do at the King's ball, under cover of his petticoats?" At that very moment, Eon leant towards her and bowed his head so that it rested in the hollow of her shoulder, just as young girls do with their mothers, or younger sisters with their elder. Mme de Rochefort felt that she might faint at any moment. But the admiration of the men was immediate, and vivaciously expressed:

"Truly delightful."

"Most touching."

"Enough to delight the heart of any man!"

"And yet, in some slight way or other—that is part of the character he is to play—one realizes that the enchantress has come straight from the provinces," remarked Besenval. The maid slipped the dress over Eon's head, and at once the young man, raised on his high heels, seemed taller, and even more slender-waisted. He was in fact unrecognizable. His fingers toying with his skirt, a knot of pink ribbon at his breast and the lace borders of his camisole underlining the whiteness of his skin, he was a girl from the provinces surely enough, but one with the power to turn many a head.

"By God!" said the Duc de Nivernais. "Devil take any man who would not fall in love with that."

Du Barry made a knowing grimace and slapped his thighs with a loud laugh which made all turn towards him; then he made off in a hurry. Meanwhile, the Countess was fitting over the hair, of which in fact many a woman might have been jealous, the most charming of head-gear, or rather a sort of lace scarf which she had taken from a cupboard. "Anyone might well mistake her for me if she were masked," she said.

"So much the better, for masked she must be."

"She will pass as the Princess of China," said the Duke.

Nothing more was needed but a ribbon for the neck, which must be black. One was found and put on, and the effect was charming. Then it seemed that two large pearl ear-rings should be added.

"Well, how is that?" asked the Countess when she had fixed them on.

Eon, standing upright in his pink dress, smiled at them.

Everyone cried out, "Let's have the mask now." It was a black eye-mask trimmed with pink lace to match the dress, and it added a touch of mystery to the disguise.

At this moment du Barry came back and whispered to Lauraguais, who uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"I have staked everything on this," said the Roué.

"You have drunk too much!"

"Not a drop."

"Then you are mad."

"On the contrary, I was never more sane."

"But you are throwing Eon to the wolves."

"And bring about the fall of the Pompadour."

"But suppose the plan fails . . ."

"Then it is the Bastille, as Eon said just now, and this time with no hope of pardon. But in the first place, I have never heard of a nobleman failing to get out of the Bastille somehow, and in the second, he who nothing ventures, nothing gets."

A large brown cloak had been thrown over Eon's shoulders and he had put on his mask.

"Countess," said the Duke, "this is a success of which our great-grandchildren will still talk. I have two coaches waiting below and I will take you all. To Versailles!"

The ballroom was a brilliant sight. Twenty chandeliers sparkled with lighted candles and twenty fires of twigs lit up the tall mirrors. A cohort of lackeys, ushers and guards stood motionless along the walls or served behind the long tables loaded with cakes, fruits, pastries and wines. The blades of the halberds shone with a bright flame above the throng of men and women, decked out in silks, brocades and damasks, sewn with diamonds which in their turn threw out sparks of blue and white and pink.

There were five hundred couples in the room, all blazing with jewels, the women making a generous display of neck and shoulders, the men in most fantastic disguises, but all showing a taste for attractiveness, for dignity and splendour. Anything farcical and, still more, anything ridiculous was entirely banned. Everyone was masked, but the greater number of women had their masks in their hands, for in this narrow circle where everyone knew everyone there was no question, as there was

at the Opera balls where might be found shopkeepers' women-folk and kept women, of starting a flirtation without knowing with whom one had to deal. The only intriguing thing that might perhaps be expected was the presence of a handful of young women from the provinces, relations of people attached to the Court, for whom this ball was like a glimpse of Paradise; but these "foreigners" were easily recognized by some indefinable artificiality in their manner—an attitude which showed that they were only too conscious of taking part in a "Carnival" and a "masquerade." Moreover, they were always accompanied by their relations, and by knowing these, it was not difficult to guess the parentage of the young women. Thus all mystery was soon dispersed, either under the piercing gaze of the crowd or in a hail of impertinent questions.

For the women, then, this was a gala ball like any other such. The only difference from the ordinary Court balls was that here masks were carried, however much or little they might be used. But with the men, who were all disguised, there was still an element of mystery. Many of the young men, dressed up in strange uniforms with Oriental breeches, fur collars and bonnets, outrageous wigs and Turkish adornments, with bristling moustaches and false noses, amused themselves by letting their identity be guessed, and they could be seen surrounded by swarms of women trying to solve the riddle. The most inquisitive group was that which surrounded an unknown young woman, led by a bear and followed by a noisy, laughing band of maskers. One guessed that under her black mask the woman was pretty. Her followers pressed closely round her and by the way they behaved they were soon recognized—the Duc de Nivernais, du Barry, Lauraguais, Sainte-Foy. And the bear—yes, of course, the bear was Besenval. But as for the woman . . .

"I swear that she does not belong to the Court."

"Could they have been rash enough to bring some girl from the Opera to a Court ball?"

"Or even one from the Palais-Royal?"

"Oh, no! She is a relation of one of them."

"Anyhow, look at her with Mme de Rochefort."

The Countess de Rochefort had indeed called the unknown to her side, and the Countess was of very good reputation;

obviously this little girl must be somebody's cousin from the provinces. But why did she not let her face be seen? The gossips were ready at once with a good reason:

"Bah! She has some defect to hide. Her chin is well shaped, her complexion is fresh and her hair is pretty. She seems to have bright eyes. Probably she has a scar or a birthmark."

On that, Eon took off his mask. Two hundred pairs of eyes concentrated on him but he behaved as if he did not notice anything and seemed to be perfectly at his ease as he chatted to the Countess. All the trained observers of the Court noticed the air of familiarity mixed with modesty and even a certain deference.

"She must be a relation," they said.

"Yes, a country girl."

"But dressed like one of us."

"And she holds herself and walks like a lady of the Court. Just look at her—how she carries her head high. Look at her poise and the way she uses her eyes and lifts her fan!"

Suddenly the Swiss guard struck the ground with his halberd and announced, "His Majesty the King."

Amid bows and curtsies, Louis XV entered the ballroom. He was then a man of barely forty-five, still divinely handsome, tall enough and not too fat, although comfortably plump. His manner was most dignified. He swept the gathering with his blue eyes and he had already beckoned to the Marquise de Pompadour from some distance away.

The fiddles struck up and the ball began. The King looked as bored as usual. Well he knew these women, all of them. Some had been his mistresses, always rushing headlong in an eagerness to yield themselves that robbed their conquest of all value. Madames de Robecq, de Perigord, de Forcalquier—and many others whose names he could not even remember. And then suddenly a young woman went past on the arm of du Barry. The King was as well aware as everyone else of the Count's bad reputation, and he smiled. But this young woman, with her perfect figure and wasp-like waist, her upright carriage and graceful shoulders, made an astonishing impression of strength allied to elegance. Her back, he noticed, was flat, and her attitude was self-possessed. She must, he thought, be a girl



accustomed to boyish sports, a young lady brought up in the country. But as the King stared at her and took in every detail, he suddenly began to lose his head a little, for he guessed her to be a person as robust as his own horses and dogs, full-blooded, alert, sinewy and quick-moving; in fact, as different as could be from the jelly-fishes to whom he was only too well accustomed.

"Lebel," he asked, turned to his gentleman, "do you know that woman in pink?"

"Sire, she was chaperoned by the Countess de Rochefort."

"She must be a relation," said the King. "Look now . . ."

The dancing couples were already leaving the floor and breaking up. Refreshments were being handed round. Du Barry took Eon back to Mme de Rochefort and started to wander about the ballroom looking for quiet corners and little anterooms. As he stood in the opening of a window, out of the crowd and almost alone, Lebel came up to him. "You were dancing with a very pretty woman, Count," he began.

"May I ask, Monsieur le Premier, whether His Majesty did her the honour to take notice of her?"

"Well, to be frank, he certainly did. Is she a relation of yours?"

"Why not my wife?" asked du Barry, laughingly.

Lebel made no answer, but du Barry guessed that he was thinking to himself, "Then in that case it will cost more, that's all." And he went on: "No, don't worry. She is, as you say, a relation of mine. A young woman from our part of the country—the Rouergue."

"That is obvious," said Lebel, "in spite of her fair complexion. She is charming. When will you present her to the King?"

"At once, if you wish it."

Through a half-open door, two feet away, they had a momentary glimpse of a passing shadow, revealed by the flickering light of the candles. Someone was eavesdropping.

"Some inquisitive woman," said Lebel.

But du Barry, who not long before had noticed a quick gesture made by the Marquise, knew that this was a woman belonging to her.

"His Majesty will be duly grateful to you for the service," went on Lebel in a lower voice, speaking close to du Barry's ear. "Apart from his personal gratitude, he would wish to do you a favour. Perhaps you have some debts outstanding? He would willingly pay them, up to a figure of twenty thousand." He thought he saw a dissatisfied look on du Barry's face. "Well, say thirty thousand pistoles."

"Unfortunately," said du Barry, "fifty thousand would not cover the whole of them."

"Well, call it fifty thousand," answered the other. "As for the girl, the King is a princely gentleman, as you know yourself."

The Roué shook his head. "I shall have to persuade her. She is a country-bred girl, and you know what they are like. Their reputation, their honour, as they call it! This one is a virgin."

"The King will find a husband for her," said Lebel.

The Roué sighed. "I am doing a detestable thing. Think of her family, who entrusted her to me. Think how I put her in the care of Mme de Rochefort."

"My dear Count," said Lebel, "do not talk like a child."

"Monsieur le Premier, I have a conscience."

"Well, we will go as far as sixty thousand but honestly that is as much as I can do."

Du Barry assumed an air of the greatest perplexity. Lebel took him by the arm. "Will you please come to the first room in the King's apartments in half an hour from now. Just go out on to the terrace as if you were taking the air. Someone will meet you there and guide you."

"Very well," agreed du Barry, "but beg the King not to be in a hurry. He must give his prize a few minutes to compose herself before he appears on the scene. I beg you not to allow my little fawn to be terrified."

Lebel nodded agreement and disappeared.

Thereupon, du Barry went back into the ballroom where his eyes immediately sought out the Marquise. She seemed agitated, and her gaze was fixed on Léon who, after dancing with the Duc de Nivernais, had seated himself demurely beside Mme de Rochefort. Suddenly the Marquise noticed du Barry, and he saw her make a signal to a lady-in-waiting, the one called du Hausset, who was completely in her confidence.

Du Barry pretended not to have noticed anything and once more went out of the room, fanning himself with his handkerchief, like a man seeking fresh air.

The King's official mistress, who in the following years was to become the first lady of the Queen's household, occupied a very curious position at Versailles. Tall and well-made, with beautiful chestnut hair, she had a smooth, soft skin of startling whiteness. She had attracted the King in the beginning by her physical charms and also by a series of audacious tricks. First among these was her behaviour at the ball (a masked ball like this one) given at the Hotel de Ville to celebrate the Dauphin's marriage, when she had carried on a flirtation with the King under cover of her mask and pushed her effrontery to the point of throwing him her handkerchief, which the King had gallantly picked up. After this, although she was married and had a little daughter, she had received the King secretly, first at the house of one of his gentlemen and then at that of her own mother, Mme Poisson, who was only too delighted to lend a helping hand in the intrigue. There, as far as the King was concerned, the matter would have rested had not Mme d'Etoilles made up her mind to go to Versailles and throw herself at his feet, bathed in tears and crying that she was ruined, that her husband knew all and was threatening to kill her. Louis XV fell into the trap; he had a bed made up for her in the Superintendent's quarters, and the next day he installed her in Mme de Mailly's apartments.

But although it was a great step to get inside the Palace it was even more important to make sure of staying there. For, not only was the King a man of fickle and capricious temper, but the Marquise's own charms were fading all too swiftly. By nature phlegmatic, she was always pale and languid; she weighed less than eight stone and the gossips said that her neck was a mass of wrinkles and her complexion faded. At the same time her face was still charming in a way which was difficult to describe; her expression was lively, quickly changing and hard to define; her enemies said that she had no features. In the bright light of day she was somewhat haggard perhaps, but that could be put right by art, and in the candlelight she was quite exquisite.

All the same, although she did not allow it to be seen, she was anxious, trembling at the least hint of anything untoward, and always on the alert to disrupt any undermining influence, and to push out her own countermines. Thus she was always spying on the King, dreading the worst and frenziedly seeking to destroy any influence which seemed suspect, and to think out some new distraction for his thoughts, even if it were only a new costume or a novel style of hairdressing. On top of all this she was in despair at her own lack of passion and was accustomed to stuff herself with chocolate, vanilla, truffles, celery and even aphrodisiac drugs, none of which unfortunately had any effect.

So du Barry, who was familiar with every little detail of this gossip which circulated through the Court, left the ballroom without any appearance of hurry. A few seconds later, at a turn in the corridor, du Hausset came up to him. "The Marquise has every confidence in you," she said.

"As for me, Madame, I am her humble servant."

"Then tell me, Count, who is the pretty girl with whom you were dancing?"

"A relation of mine, Madame."

"And Monsieur Lebel is interested in her?"

"I see it is impossible to hide anything from your mistress."

"Perhaps so; but it might be possible to help her."

"And if I did, do you think I might expect some little token of gratitude?"

"Can you doubt it?" said du Hausset emphatically. "I have been ordered to tell you that you will certainly not be forgotten."

Du Barry looked piercingly at her. "In those circumstances . . ." he began. He stopped, and then went on in dramatic tones, "Oh! you will destroy me!" And when du Hausset pressed him, saying that Madame must know the girl's name, he said, "It must be a secret, anyhow."

"Of course, of course!" answered the woman.

He hesitated, and then, with a sudden change of manner, "What does the name matter? Tell your mistress to be in the first little room of the King's apartments in exactly ten minutes from now. Alone, of course. There she will find a woman with whom she must deal."

With that he turned on his heel. A few minutes later he took Eon's arm again and they began to dance once more, talking together through clenched teeth.

"Do you want to make your fortune?" asked du Barry.

"Do I not!"

"Would you like to be the lover of the Marquise?"

"The Pompadour?"

"Don't mention her name. Yes, herself."

"Why not? But when and how?"

As the Chevalier hissed these questions, du Barry felt his hand tighten on his own.

"You will be taken to a certain place where she is expecting you, but there has not been time to tell her that you are dressed as a woman, and she thinks that she is going to keep an assignment with the Chevalier as she knows him. When she comes into the room you must not give her any time to recover from the shock, however angry she may be at discovering a woman where she expected to find a man. Obviously she will think that you have come to meet the King. Do you understand? It would be a waste of time to start arguing about it. Tell her that you are her Chevalier, her faithful servant. Prove to her that she has nothing to fear from you; quite the contrary. In a word, carry the position by assault. She is not strong enough to hold out against you. And—a last word of advice—take your time over the business."

A few minutes later, seeing du Barry wandering about with an air of seriousness unusual to him, his friends approached him.

"You look to me as if you were hatching a plot," said Lauraguais.

"We saw you with Lebel," added Sainte-Foy.

"Who could you have been suggesting to him?" asked Besenval.

"My honest Swiss," answered du Barry, "who do you suppose? Why, our little Chevalier!"

They looked at one another and fear was in their eyes.

"High treason!" said Besenval.

"The Bastille!" said Lauraguais.

"You must be mad!" said Sainte-Foy, looking askance at him.

Du Barry addressed them all in a cold voice. "Listen to me, my friends. I am trying to ruin the Pompadour. I do not ask your help. A meeting between the King and the Chevalier has been arranged with Lebel. So far, so good. But I have warned the Pompadour, and she will be at the appointed place less than a quarter of an hour before the King. And I have told our Chevalier that the Pompadour will be expecting him there, that she will be astonished to see him disguised as a woman, and that his business is to prove to her that he is a man!"

Sainte-Foy began to laugh. "But the Chevalier did not look to me as if he was very enthusiastic about it."

"The Chevalier has not shown any interest in women, I agree. But I have been watching him carefully." (Here du Barry raised his finger like a doctor making a diagnosis.) "Gentlemen, he will not be so neglectful in future. Under the spell of the most charming of her sex, the Cherub has woken up at last!"

"What then?" they cried.

"Then, unless Eon behaves like a child—and I am sure he won't—the Pompadour will be caught in the act by her royal lover and dismissed!"

"There is certainly no doubt that at first sight the scene will seem extremely peculiar to the King," said Lauraguais. "But what will happen to Eon?"

"Eon? He will have rendered a service to the King."

"And what about you?"

"Me? I, too, will have helped! Why not? All that I shall have to do next is to find a successor to the Marquise, and the devil of it is that I haven't got one. But that will right itself. When this comes out there will be a mighty gathering of whores. We will cast our nets and may bring in a siren. Anyhow, there can be no doubt that the King will owe me a great debt of gratitude."

"Du Barry," said Lauraguais, "I have always known that every Gascon was foolhardy, but you are the whole of Gascony rolled into one. My own opinion is that when Lebel has told the King all about this business, whatever else may happen, you and Eon are bound to finish up in the Bastille. Think it over, my dear man. Even if your schemes succeed, how can you expect the King to be grateful to Eon for having given

him a pair of horns, and to you for having helped him to do it?"

Du Barry seemed to be astonished. "Good Lord!" he answered. "It would not be the first time that a man has heaved a sigh of relief when he found out that his wife or his mistress was deceiving him."

"True enough, but have you ever heard of him showing any gratitude to the man who helped him to his freedom?"

They all looked pityingly at one another. "My poor du Barry," said one—and the others all echoed, "My poor du Barry! My poor du Barry!"

With that they turned their backs on him. It was done most tactfully, without being marked. There were smiles and salutes and handshakes; Sainte-Foy even embraced him. Then they tiptoed away, all four of them in turn until he was alone, looking at their rounded backs and bowed necks. They slipped through the crowd and hurried from the room without a backward glance, and by the time the first of them passed through the door he had no doubt already forgotten the doomed man. For a moment du Barry found himself shivering a little, but he very soon recovered himself. "Oh well," he said to himself, "Bastille let it be. While I am there I shall at least be left in peace by my creditors."

### CHAPTER III

## Check

MME DE ROCHEFORT was exchanging curtsies with a duchess. Eon, answering a wink from du Barry, took advantage of the opportunity to disappear. He felt a pang of remorse. "I am a monster," he told himself. "Do I not worship that charming creature? Of course I do. I ought to stay at her side, close to her petticoats, without moving, like a pet dog, if I had the slightest feeling of honour or propriety." But even as he thought this, he was in a fever of excitement at the prospect of success. The Marquise was the Sovereign; it was she who made and unmade generals and ministers; to be received by the Marquise was the one ambition of the greatest in the land—to be loved by her would be the height of glory! As for Mme de Rochefort she was a charmer, but could she ever be expected to welcome a change of attitude on the part of her Cherub? To hurry things in that quarter would be to run the risk of destroying a beautiful friendship. Was it not infinitely more reasonable to keep up the tender and respectful attitude which seemed to satisfy his adorable friend and to risk everything on the glittering card which Fate had dealt him?

The attitude was cynical enough, as Eon felt, but after all he was young and ambitious, and he was not without a certain pride in this late awakening of his senses. He reminded himself that he was now in a position to laugh last at those who had jeered at him, for certainly not one of them had ever made so great a conquest. At the same time he was conscious of a rather uneasy feeling, caused by the fact that all this should have been brought about by du Barry's intervention. He would have been happier if he had had some sign from the Marquise herself, whether by word or gesture or even a meaning glance or lingering look, so that he might know that she herself had invited him to this meeting. The whole affair seemed mysterious to him. It was quite true that the Pompadour was bound to have



noticed him when he was dressed as a woman, but where or when could she have seen him in his proper person? However, he assured himself that when one is being swept along by a current it is best to let oneself go with it and not waste time trying to find out where it comes from.

Such were the Chevalier's reflections as he followed (with his mask in place again, to avoid all risks) a middle-aged woman who, though she looked to be of the lower class, was obviously a person who was in the confidence of her employer. Every now and then she gave a discreet backward glance to make certain that they were following her. In this way they went down to the main floor and out on the terrace, and after skirting awhile the side of the Palace, they entered it again by a door which Eon had not previously seen. When they came to the foot of a staircase the woman said to du Barry, "Thank you, Count. From here we shall not need your escort."

Du Barry bowed and disappeared in the shadows.

The woman waited till he had gone, and then signed to Eon to follow her up the steep stairs. At the top they went along a windowless passage which must have been lighted day and night by candles, and suddenly Eon found himself alone in a modest room which held only a table, a few chairs and a sofa of some size. There were two doors, the one by which Eon had entered and another exactly opposite it on the other side of the sofa. Heavy curtains were drawn across the windows and a cheerful fire was blazing. On the table was a light meal with two bottles of wine and two glasses. Everything in train for a *tête-à-tête*. No noise penetrated to this little retreat, which was evidently the secret room chosen by the Pompadour for an amorous meeting with the Chevalier. In fact it was hard to believe that the King's fancy-dress ball had ever taken place.

Eon, while keeping his ears open, lost himself in his dreams. He was not concerned with the Pompadour's age. Indeed, at that time she was still only thirty-four—which was just about right for a youth about to take the plunge. He began to consider what would happen when she came in. Once past the difficult moment before she recognized him, what should he say to her? He must show intelligence, wit, charm and tact. And, if necessary, decisiveness. He had no doubt that he would

be acceptable, since he had already been so to Mme de Rochefort. Thinking of the Countess, he gave a little sigh, but soon resumed his planning. So he would be accepted and his sweet prey once enjoyed, they would dare delicious rendezvous.

As Eon looked round at the royal cypher on furniture and hangings, showing clearly that this was one of Louis XV's private rooms, he realized that few meeting-places could be more audacious than this. It seemed unheard of to him and his heart was filled with pride. At that moment, loyal subject though he was, Eon felt a little pity for his King—the same sort of contemptuous pity that Louis XV had once felt towards M. Lenormand d'Étoilles, the pity of the lover for the husband.

"What shall I ask from her in a few days' time, when I see her again?" he wondered. "A lieutenancy? Oh surely, my dear Eon, if you want to get on you must aim higher than that! Her brother Marigny is the controller of public works. I should have at least a company or, for that matter, why not a regiment? A regiment of dragoons would be nice. The red-and-blue uniform would suit me perfectly. I am a good horseman, and in the first rank of swordsmen, so I should certainly be most worthy of her."

So much was he carried away by his thoughts that as he sat on the sofa he clasped his knee between his hands much as a dragoon might do. "This is my greatest hour," he said to himself. "Eon! look closely at your surroundings, for they will always remind you of your triumph." And he repeated to himself, but aloud, with a little catch in his voice, "Your triumph!"

But, even as he uttered the words, he was frightened by the sound of his own voice.

Suddenly, there was a slight sound, that of a key turning in a lock. Eon jumped to his feet, a little too much like a soldier perhaps. His eyes were fixed on the door by which he had come in. But it was the other door which opened as he realized when he heard the swish of a woman's dress. He had scarcely time to turn in that direction before he saw the Marquise facing him.

Heavens above! this was not the charming creature who had ruled over the ball. This was a woman in a frenzy of rage, white-faced under her rouge, with heaving breast, trembling lips and angry eyes. She bore straight down upon him. "Who

are you?" she demanded. Then brusquely snatched the mask from his face.

No doubt, however much du Hausset had insisted that they were dealing with an unknown woman, she had still expected to find in her rival someone whom she knew by sight—one of those women who were perpetually fixing their covetous eyes on the King—women who knew no restraint of religion, manners, decency or good repute, who were not even afraid of their husbands but who at the first sign of encouragement would have hurled themselves into the royal bed.

"Who are you?" she asked again.

In spite of all his efforts Eon's smile showed a certain irony. "It is just as du Barry said," he thought. "She expected to find a man and instead she sees a woman, and probably a woman who has come to keep a secret tryst with the King. No wonder she is angry." But the Marquise read the smile as insult. "This girl is laughing at me," she said to herself. And in the belief that she was dealing with some conceited country chit, or perhaps with some little bourgeoisie who needed to be taught a lesson—one of those whom the King called "the little madams"—she boxed his ears with her thin, hard hand, a hand which already showed the symptoms of her tubercular condition.

"Oh, Madame, that is too much of a good thing," cried Eon. And with that he threw her head over heels on the sofa and closed her mouth with a kiss.

The Marquise had been ready for almost anything. She had expected the other to fall on her knees, to beg for pardon, to take to her heels, possibly even to try to outface her, anything except an attack of this kind. Now she found herself firmly grasped in a pair of arms which, slim though they were, had astonishing strength. This woman was crushing her with her body, embracing her passionately. As she freed her mouth she murmured, "Stop it, stop it!"

"Who am I?" said the other, between two kisses. "I am a man, a man. And I'm going to prove it to you!"

"Sir . . . my God! . . . the King . . ."

"The King is at the ball."

"But he is coming here."

"Not he!"

"I swear he is."

"You are teasing me."

"You will ruin me."

"I love you!"

For a few seconds the Marquise struggled desperately; then she was overcome by lassitude. She was terrified by the thought that the King might come in, would indeed come in, since she had expected to surprise him there with the person she had thought to be a woman, but now unfortunately knew but too well to be a man. She foresaw the ruin of ten years of constant effort. All her good fortune was crumbling before her eyes. Mme Lebon, to whom she allowed £600 a year, had predicted when she was only nine years old that she would one day be the mistress of Louis XV. Certainly the prophesy had come true, but it was still possible to fall even from that high position. She had a vision of ruin at the very moment of her triumph, of hearing the King's laughter or seeing his contemptuous smile, and of receiving that very night the order to pack up and leave Versailles. She thought of the servants, who only yesterday were full of obsequiousness, spitting out their hatred against the discarded favourite; she pictured the empty rooms and the courtiers hissing like snakes as they abandoned her. Locked in Eon's arms, subdued by his strength and counting every second, she shut her eyes to try to escape the terrible pictures which swam in her imagination; the King, the King in all his majesty, the King destroying her with a look . . . My God! To fly with all the world laughing at her . . . Exile . . . A convent . . . Obscurity . . . Shame . . .

"Sir," she whispered, "we are in the King's room."

Her too-loving adversary ignored the half-choked murmur. Again the Marquise strove to warn her lover of their danger.

"The King's room, sir . . ."

The door might open at any moment. To go on struggling was only to prolong the danger. Besides, Eon was following up his advantage most vigorously. Already his hand was under her petticoats.

"Sir . . ." she breathed again. Eon closed her mouth with a kiss and his hands continued to stray.

He felt her give up the struggle. For another few moments

she lay without moving, savouring her pleasure at feeling the weight of the young man's body on hers. Then she was seized by a sudden spasm of terror and managed to push him away and leap to her feet. She stood with her hair astray and her clothes dishevelled, trying to regain a decent appearance in the eyes of her adversary, who, for his part, was readjusting himself, putting his headgear on straight, and bowing deeply to her with a sly smile. But triumphant as his smile was, it held a trace of embarrassment, as if he was inclined to crave her pardon.

"Madame," he said, "behold your serving wench becomes the foremost of your servants!"

"Oh!" said she between her teeth. "So we are witty as well as everything else! Are you not ashamed of yourself, you horrid monster?"

Eon had no time to answer, for the Marquise, hearing the sound of steps, laid a finger on her lips. Eon too heard these steps. He turned his head for no more than a second, but as he turned back towards the Marquise he caught only a glimpse of her arm and the swirl of her dress. As silently as a mouse the King's mistress had slipped away through the door by which she came in. Eon was left alone. A few seconds passed before the other door slowly opened—slowly enough to give the Chevalier time to assume once more the air, the smile and the bearing of a woman. Then suddenly there appeared a tall, vigorous-looking man, with fine features and a remarkably handsome face—the King himself.

Eon swept into a perfect curtsy, and even as he did so he thought, "I am a dead man. Someone must have told the King that the Marquise was meeting me here. I shall be torn to pieces." But the King, as he shut the door behind him, looked neither worried nor angry. He made a sign to Eon to sit down, and at once sat down himself beside him on the sofa, and having noticed the expression of anxiety on the other's handsome face, he asked:

"Have I frightened you, Madame?"

"Not at all, Sire."

In truth, the Chevalier had quite recovered himself, and he was satisfied that his voice sounded perfectly normal. Meanwhile,

he was thinking hard. Perhaps the King was hiding his real feelings, but on the other hand perhaps the whole thing was a coincidence. At the worst, even if the King had been warned and expected to surprise the favourite with her lover, all had passed off well and there was no longer any shadow of danger. But the King's eyes and his whole attitude seemed to reflect desire. "It looks for all the world," said Eon to himself, "as if having been led to suppose that I was to be favoured by the Marquise in my capacity as a man, I am in fact being favoured by the King in the capacity of a woman. What a damned funny position! Can I have been followed, and has someone gone to the King to tell him that the mysterious woman at the ball has been seen going up to his private rooms? Does he think that I am an adventuress who has come to throw herself into his arms?" The most far-fetched ideas passed through his mind. Meanwhile, the King was coming nearer, taking obvious pains not to frighten this unknown girl. Now that he saw her at close quarters he was even more intrigued by her than he had been in the distance. He took hold of a well-shaped hand and examined it, stroking it gently meanwhile:

"The hand of a horsewoman," he said.

"Your Majesty knows everything," answered Eon.

The King continued, after examining a little callous between the thumb and the forefinger, "It would not surprise me if you were accustomed to fencing."

"My word," cried Eon gaily, "Your Majesty is a wizard!"

"Not at all," said the King, fondling the two fingers and putting them to his lips, "I am just a good observer. And I know that in the provinces, if I am not mistaken, there are ladies who try to dispel their boredom by pastimes which in general are practised only by gentlemen."

The King showed every sign of being fascinated by the warmth and robustness of the young woman. When he went to spend the night with the Pompadour he often slept, not in her bed, but stretched out on a sofa in her room. He had been heard to say, "That woman is a statue carved in ice." And she suffered as much as he did, for she worshipped him and would have sacrificed her life to give him pleasure, and yet she could not do it. At this moment the King remembered all this. He

saw before him what seemed the opposite of the Marquise; a woman smaller than her, but evidently stronger and more full-blooded; one who appeared to combine both feminine and masculine characteristics in a curious hermaphroditism. He could not judge of her hips under the paniers and her back seemed flat, but she had a charming face, with more than a hint of strength in its contours. Above all, he was intrigued by the candid and far from cold expression in which he noticed a play of rather anxious curiosity with a hint of mockery. He went on stroking Eon's hand and asking questions about "her" origins and the part of the country from which "she" came. "This is a queer situation to be in," thought the Chevalier as he noticed the King's growing emotion and asked himself what he should do when Louis tried to push the matter further. Should he pretend to be shocked? Should he struggle and scream? Should he use his strength to hold the King off by taking hold of his arms? But considering how experienced the man was in dealing with women, it was most unlikely that, if it came to a hand-to-hand struggle, he would fail to discover the deception which had been practised on him.

At that moment, as he gradually drew away while the King moved towards him on the sofa, Eon began to wonder if he had not been the dupe of du Barry. But to what purpose? To make a fool of the King? That would be too risky. Then what could be the connection between his being thrown into the Marquise's arms and the arrival of the King, who—as Eon now clearly realized—had not come there by accident, and yet obviously knew nothing of what had been happening. Suddenly light dawned on him. "I know now," he cried to himself. He remembered Lauraguais' expression, "We must depompadourize France" and he remembered too du Barry's advice, "Take your time." Well, if that was it, things had gone wrong. Either the Marquise had escaped from him too quickly or the King had been too late in keeping the appointment so cunningly made for him. But of one thing Eon was certain; if he played his cards well he could turn this adventure to profit and ensure for himself the protection of the Marquise. For the moment, the main thing was to avoid provoking the King's anger and to manage to turn the whole thing into a joke. Perhaps

he could turn things to his advantage in that direction as well, after everyone had enjoyed a laugh at his expense. While these thoughts were passing through his mind he thought he heard, in one of the intervals of their rather hushed conversation, a little noise as of a mouse scratching the woodwork. He wondered if they were being spied on and, if so, by whom. It might be the Marquise behind the door. If so, she would have nothing to fear since she knew without doubt what his sex was. But, he reflected, she might hope, owing to Eon's disguise, to catch the King redhanded. If that was the idea, the sooner it happened the better, before the King discovered the Chevalier. On the other hand, if he remained convinced that he was dealing with a girl, how would he ever know of the existence of the Chevalier d'Eon?

Meanwhile, the noise went on, and in order to hear it more easily Eon was rash enough to turn his head slightly and take his eyes off Louis. It was only for a second, but that was enough for the King. Louis, who by this time was sitting very close to him, seized him by the waist and threw him down on the sofa, rumpling his petticoats.

"Sire," cried Eon, wriggling free with extreme agility, and twisting from side to side like an eel. "Sire, we are in fancy-dress to-night . . ."

"In fancy dress," repeated a pleasant voice. There in the doorway stood the Marquise, laughing all over her face and clapping her hands. "The masked stranger!" she cried, "Oh, what a joke!"

The King had picked himself up quickly while Eon rushed to the other side of the room, and he stood with dangling arms looking astonished and annoyed.

"Sire," said Eon, "my disguise deceived Your Majesty. I am a man."

The King did not answer. He was gradually recovering himself and resuming his natural air of majesty. The Marquise turned on Eon a coldly reproving gaze ("My God," thought the Chevalier, "how quickly she forgets!") and ordered him to leave them. He went out after a double curtsy and closed the door behind him, but not before he had heard a laugh, and then the Marquise's voice, "Oh, Sire, so that is the way you



treat your poor old friend, and that is the way—I ask you to excuse the expression, but it fits the case—that is the way to make a fool of Your Majesty—just because of your weakness.”

Eon picked up his skirts and took to his heels down the corridors.

He got back as fast as he could to the ballroom. The Countess was still there, but now she was surrounded by other ladies. He felt a strange remorse at the sight of her, for he felt as if he had betrayed her. He curtsied to her from a distance. After that he looked round him for an escort and found no one but du Barry. Neither Lauraguais nor any other member of the usual crowd was to be seen. Eon had the feeling that he and du Barry were a pair of pariahs. As he walked beside his friend he told him as much as he thought fit, without saying a word about his affair with the Marquise. Although he turned a black look on the Gascon, he could not really be angry with him, for after all, as he told himself, it was du Barry who had given him his opportunity and no woman was likely to forget such a moment. Finally, he spoke through his teeth. “You certainly played a fine trick on the King,” he said as they got into their carriage, “but it was also one on me, and one which will probably land me in the Bastille.”

“Oh well, I shall be there too,” answered du Barry. “We must face it, Chevalier, no one at this Court has any idea of fun any longer.”

In the silence that followed, du Barry thought to himself, “I have behaved like a child. My great idea has turned into a mere carnival jest.” Eon looked down his nose at his friend, wishing but not daring to wring his neck. They were both so worried and anxious that, after visiting the Countess’s lodging for Eon to change back into his ordinary clothes, they went on together to the “Man at Arms,” a drinking-shop behind the Church of Saint-Germaine. This was a place they often frequented, but ordinarily when they were in a cheerful frame of mind. To-night they went there to drown the load of trouble which was weighing on them. Eon was feeling thoroughly quarrelsome towards all the world; du Barry was more or less in a state of stupor. They emptied one bottle after another, and when they reached a point where, while still able to walk straight and think

clearly, they had recovered their natural light-heartedness under the influence of the good wine of the Loire, Eon took du Barry by the arm and they marched off together to the Bastille itself. "We may just as well go there right away," they said to one another. "Then when they come to look for us they will find us inside already." But at the great gates giving on to the street of Saint-Antoine they were stopped by the sentry and when they tried to press past him the sergeant of the guard appeared hat in hand.

"We have come to get ourselves locked up," said Eon.

The sergeant, who had never seen anything like this before, went to fetch the King's Lieutenant, M. Abadie, who was equally surprised at this strange idea.

"Surely, sir, you can open the door and let us come in over the bridge," du Barry asked him.

"No, sir, I cannot. Why, only lately, entry was refused to His Majesty the Tsar of All the Russias."

"But we are men of quality, sir . . ."

"So I see, gentlemen, but these are the King's orders."

"And furthermore," said du Barry, casually, "we are guilty of the crime of high treason . . ."

"In that case, gentlemen," said M. d'Abadie, bowing yet more profoundly, "you have only to await the arrival of the King's messengers. But it would be better to wait for them at your own lodging. You may be sure that they will provide you with a coach and that the Governor will receive you with all the marks of respect due to persons of quality."

## CHAPTER IV

# A Prince of the Blood has Ambitions

THE TWO MEN parted company opposite the Hotel de Ville. Eon walked quickly towards the Temple. He was anxious to pour out his hopes and fears to a man whom he saw regularly every day, and whom he considered his only support in the life of Town and Court. This was the Prince de Conti, grandson of the Conti who had been chosen King of Poland in 1697, but had failed to keep his throne, and great-great-nephew of the Great Condé. Eon had taken station behind him as a small brig might follow in the wake of a ship of the line, hoping with such a leader to make against wind and sea, a port where fortune should await him. But to fulfil such hopes the Prince himself must achieve a destiny worthy of his name and ambitions.

Eon found himself in front of the beautiful palace which formed a main feature of the precinct. The pedimented façade with its row of single Doric columns, topped by an attic storey, gave on to the street of the Temple. The entrance led into a great courtyard, surrounded by an arcade of double columns. On the right the turrets of the tower of the Temple could be seen. The precinct formed a city of its own, in which the police had no right of entry. It was full of tradesmen who valued the freedom which they enjoyed there, and of debtors on the run who could snap their fingers at the threat of arrest once they reached this sanctuary. Here, one might say, Conti reigned as King. Here he received in most magnificent style the best society of the day. The honours of his house were done by his friend the Countess de Boufflers, and public opinion in that tolerant age smilingly endorsed this affront to civil and religious law.

Conti and Mme de Boufflers were accustomed to receive a brilliant company in which poets and philosophers rubbed shoulders with ministers in office, generals of the Army and great ladies of the Court. The talk ranged over every subject,

whether literary or political, and reflected the cynical attitude which was so natural to the times that it did not even shock Versailles, the last stronghold of the days of the Great King.

Eon found the Prince in the small room where he worked, sitting at his desk in a dressing-gown. There was no one with him but a man with a snuff-stained nose, a dirty neck-band and a shining and threadbare coat, who sawed the air with one hand while in the other he held a small piece of paper with the aid of which he seemed to be spouting a poem. The Prince was smiling a little wryly, and he was listening, his thoughts elsewhere.

Conti was below the average in size, although even so he was a few inches taller than the Chevalier; he was well rounded and his air of dignity was tempered by an expression of good nature. Eleven years before this he had won the Battle of Coni, but since then Mme de Pompadour had sworn to shut him out of any office of importance. As he was a fine orator, he consoled himself by speaking in the Parliament. He was an energetic, highly cultivated man, affable and kindly, but at the same time obstinate and very sure of himself. Although he had a considerable following, it was not of a nature to give him scope for action. In any case, the memory that his grandfather had been chosen King of Poland had become an obsession with him and turned the normally ambitious man into a visionary. Whatever he did and wherever he went, his friends knew that he carried this memory with him like a hidden injury. He was still waiting to find a soothsayer who would look into the smoke of her magic cauldron and tell him he was destined for a throne.

"What do you think of that, Eon?" asked the Prince, pointing to the paper in the poet's shaking hand.

Eon snatched it from him, glanced at it and raised his eyebrows and appeared to read over a few lines in a low voice. Then he asked, "Your Highness has already heard it?" Conti nodded.

"It is a little better than Father Bernis' verse," said Eon.

The poet bowed. Conti raised his hands in astonishment, but there was a trace of irony in his glance and smile.

"It is worth, say, a couple of crowns."

Conti burst out laughing.

"Yes, a couple of little crowns," Eon went on, noticing how

the poet had suddenly gone white in the face. "For a poem by Bernis is worth just one."

"He will be delighted to know that," said the poet.

"You may tell him so, sir, on the word of the Chevalier d'Eon."

Conti was still laughing as he threw the two coins on the table. The poet pocketed them without any shame, but he turned on the Chevalier a look of blazing hatred. When he had gone, the Prince said, "Well, my friend, what is all this I hear about you?"

"My lord, one must do something to amuse oneself."

"But do you know that the Marquise is delighted with you? It all looks like a well-prepared plot. Tell me about it, sir."

The Chevalier described the scene, but he said nothing of his first interview with the Marquise, leaving it to be supposed that she had only come in on them in time to witness the astonishment and frustration of the King. "In this way," he thought, "I make the Marquise my accomplice."

"But the funny thing is," said Conti, "that the King himself is highly pleased. He was laughing about it to himself at his levée yesterday."

"His Majesty is too good. So it looks as if I were on my way to make my fortune?"

"There is more truth in that than you may think, Chevalier."

Conti looked closely at him and muttered, "Everything that a man should have—courage, strength of character, a taste for arms and battle—everything, except the outward appearance." Then, raising his voice, "Do you know," he went on, "that you might do us a service?"

"I know," answered Eon in a respectful voice, "that my lord has ambitions, great ambitions. Up to now I have been his poet. I feel that I might well be something more."

Conti nodded his head towards a chair. "Mine is a miserable life," he said. "I, who proved my worth in four campaigns, I who have been Commander-in-chief, I who carried by assault the fortifications of Villefranche and Château Dauphin, which were said to be impregnable; I who won the Battle of Coni find myself reduced to sitting here talking poetry and philosophy inside the four walls of my own drawing-room and practising

my rhetoric on Parliament. Do you think I am as capable as any other of governing a kingdom?"

"More so than any man I know," was the answer.

"Poland," Conti continued, "that same Poland which slipped from my grandfather's grasp, is always there for the taking. The monarchy is elective. The present Saxon King is not immortal."

He lay back in his chair and clenched his fist on its arms. After a few seconds Eon said, "If Your Excellency will allow me to express an opinion, I would remind you that the reason why your grandfather lost his opportunity in 1697 was that he started from too far away. The Elector of Saxony slipped into his place because he was nearer at hand. If Your Excellency is to make sure of the next chance you must make sure you do not run the same risk of seeing the ground cut away from under your feet. You must be already established . . ."

"In Poland?" broke in Conti excitedly. "But how could I live there?"

"No, not in Poland but nearby. In Courland, say."

Conti looked at him searchingly.

"There is a strong rumour," went on Eon, "that the Tsar Peter of Russia was very anxious at one time to marry one of his daughters, Princess Elizabeth, to the King of France."

"Yes, that is so. His advisers at that time rejected the proposal. Since then she has become Empress of Russia."

"I am told, my Lord, that the Empress Elizabeth has always cherished the memory of this idea. But it need not necessarily have been because she was so much interested in the King himself. It seems more likely that it was the luxury and magnificence of Versailles—and for that matter, of France—which attracted her attention to the young prince."

"I see what you mean," said the Prince. "In fact, I have thought of that myself."

Eon bowed. "Nevertheless, let me go further. The Tsarina has never married. To be her husband would be highly dangerous—but what an adventure! Now let us suppose, what is quite possible, that she has no wish to marry. Are you not, my Lord, the victor of Coni? Who is there among the Russian generals to be compared with you? Peter the Great surrounded

himself with foreigners; no one in Russia would be surprised to see His Excellency the Prince de Conti as Commander-in-chief of the Russian armies. And why not under the style of Prince de Courland? From Courland it would be so easy to cross into Poland."

The Prince was gazing at Eon more and more attentively. "Do you realize," he said at last, "that you have penetrated my most secret thoughts? With a man like you, in that part of the world . . ."

He rose to his feet and strode up and down the room. Eon, also on his feet, with his hands on the back of a chair, watched him.

"We have no one there," Conti soliloquized. "Since la Chetardie, with his frivolity and his boastfulness, lost all the ground which he seemed at first to be winning, we have had no one at the side of this modern Semiramis to look after our interests. Oh! what would I not give to anyone who could get me in there, so that I could see the Tsarina face to face and manage—as I certainly would manage—to win her favour? But, first one must get there. One must cross the frontier, make one's way through that desert of a country, instal oneself in the Palace and become *persona grata* in what they tell me is the most Oriental court in the world. Who is going to succeed in such a task as that?"

He broke off suddenly and stood rigidly with a finger to his ear. "Someone is listening," he said.

Eon sprang to one of the doors, which was partly hidden by a tall screen.

"Look, Highness."

The door was very slightly open, so that anyone pressed close against it could have overheard everything that was said in the room. Eon was going to rush out into the corridor, but the Prince called him back.

"Never mind. I know I am spied on. Why expect other sovereigns to neglect the methods which are used by our own? And besides, I have my enemies at Court."

He sighed. "The Russian Chancellor is a relentless enemy, with no pity for anyone. Poor Valcroissant knows all about that. He went there in disguise, was arrested as a spy and imprisoned

in the fortress of Schlussembourg on Lake Ladoga. It is freezing in winter, suffocating in summer and deadly at any time."

Silence fell as the Prince resumed his pacing to and fro. He broke off suddenly, throwing his arms out in a wide gesture. "Any other man," he said, "would meet the same fate." Then he stopped short with a start. "Only yesterday, Chevalier, you were . . . you were unrecognizable. The King himself was taken in!"

"My Lord!"

"Yes, indeed!" went on Conti. "Yes, that is the answer to our problem. We must send a woman out there. A woman does not count. No one suspects a woman. Someone who looks like a woman, but is really a man—that is the answer!"

He stopped in front of the Chevalier; he was laughing. Eon did not flinch, but he was very pale. Conti saw his white face and asked, "Chevalier, could it be that you are frightened?"

"Frightened—me?" cried Eon. "Your Excellency is joking. I'm not afraid of Schlussembourg, nor of Siberia—of the Russian Chancellor or any other man. I do not know the meaning of the word. But it is one thing to put on petticoats for an evening by way of a joke, even to deceive a Marquise and to titillate the senses of the greatest King in the world, and quite another thing to carry through, disguised as a woman, an undertaking as complicated as that which Your Lordship suggests. For that, one must play the game to the end. One must become a woman, and live as one every hour of the day and night without ever being caught off one's guard. How could anyone expect to play such a part for more than a short time?"

"Yes," said the Prince; "you see the difficulty quite clearly. And yet I cannot imagine how we could find anyone better than you. A man could not do it; a woman would not know how to get any good out of it. Once more, you are the only person . . ."

"The Chevalière . . ." sighed Eon.

"Pooh!" said Conti. "Is not diplomacy the great mother of all lies?"

A few minutes later Eon left the room. As he came into the anteroom he felt an elbow dug rudely into his ribs and, when he turned to remonstrate, he saw before him the poetaster of a



little while before. The man shook his fist in Eon's face and spluttered threats at him. "You've insulted me! You'll pay for this!"

Eon turned aside and took up a Swiss guard's cane which was lying there. Without a word, he laid it on with all his might. Cringing under the rain of blows, the other howled like a whipped cur:

"Oh! Oh! Mercy! Help! I'm being killed! Not on my head!"

And the Chevalier answered, "Certainly on your head; nothing good can ever come out of it."

A ringing blow on the head sent the man to the ground and Eon completed his victory with a stout kick in the ribs. All the flunkies in the room roared with laughter. One of the most heartily amused, an ungainly lout who had been throwing dice with a page, opened his great mouth, full of broken teeth under a bristling moustache, to shout, "Ha! ha! Look how the dear little man lays about him. Go it, my suckling!"

Hearing this, Eon withdrew his attention from the poetaster, who, with dusty clothes and bruised forehead, fled through the jeering mob. The Chevalier now fixed his gaze on the interrupter. This rascal, who wore a sword, went on addressing another who was wall-eyed and wore his wig halfway down his low forehead, "And, mark you, he looks at one without any shame!"

Eon had thrown the cane back to its Swiss owner. Drawing himself up to his full height and facing the jester squarely, he said in that high feminine voice which always came as a surprise, "Suckling? I find the word offensive!"

The man began to laugh and Eon went on, "Shall we go outside and settle the matter?"

The fellow threw down his dice. "Beauvallon," he said. "Chevalier de Beauvallon, of the Prince's household. The gentleman wishes to be taught a lesson. Let us go."

Eon felt a touch on his arm. "Sir," said the wall-eyed gentleman, "I am afraid it is too late to give you useful advice. But you have ruined yourself by your own pride. In diplomacy"—he stressed the word—"one must know how to keep one's temper and smile."

Eon laughed. "I understand. It was your delicate ear behind

the door just now. When I have dealt with this gentleman, I will rid the Prince of your services."

The man made a gesture of contempt. "Sir, you do not know Beauvallon. You had better say your prayers and bid farewell to your adventure." He roared with laughter.

Meanwhile Beauvallon went on jeering. "This thing has just come from school. It is probably a page. Or perhaps it stole the sword from its father, or from some sleeping soldier when he was asleep. All I have to do is to hold my arm out."

Half a dozen lackeys followed them and, in the colonnade, they picked up some loiterers, including the bruised poet, who had still a few insults to mutter. Finally, in the narrow street to the right, they came upon a huddle of gossips, and these, immediately taken with the Chevalier's appearance, began to shout to one another, "Look at him, dearie! See how young he is! How charming! How sweet, too! Is he going to fight? And this great lout wants to kill him. It's plain murder. We mustn't let this child be run through like that. . . ." And some of them raised a cry, "Fetch the guard! The guard! The Prince should know of this!"

The tall fellow sneered at the outburst. "Monsieur," he said, "has the women on his side. That is natural enough!"

Without answering, Eon saluted the women in acknowledgment and went straight ahead. When it was clear that he had made his mind up, the outcry died down. So they came to a narrow alley, at the entrance to which a little crowd had gathered. The women by the time were reduced to silence by the coarse jests of the flunkeys.

"Anyhow, we have enough room here to dig a hole for the gentleman," said the tall man.

Eon was still silent, but, as they laid their coats on the ground, he cast his eyes round the spectators and among them noticed the wall-eyed man, who was hiding behind a page. "The Prince will be betrayed," he thought sadly to himself. Then, noticing the air of pity on the faces of some of the on-lookers, he began to wonder if the whole thing were not a put-up job. The thought filled him with rage. He realized that the only way out of the trap was by victory. He must kill this man; this one first and then the other. His face lit up with savage joy.

"Truly," said Beauvallon, "the miss somewhat lacks chest."

"And the gentleman," retorted Eon, "something of courage."

A murmur of approval ran through the crowd. Then, as the duellists crossed swords, complete silence fell. The women, holding on to one another, never took their eyes off Eon. But the business was soon over. Skilled as he was with his sword, Eon was even more formidable in his instinct for fighting. He began carefully, taking the measure of his opponent. After keeping him in play for a few moments, he realized that he was dealing with an indifferent pupil who knew little more than a few of the ways of the fencing schools. Then, with dazzling dexterity, he engaged the other's sword and lunged at him. The onlookers scarcely realized what was happening before the bully reeled against the wall, run through the body, and lay there moaning with his knees drawn up to his stomach.

"Bravo!" cried the women, clustering round Eon and shouting for joy. The uproar deafened the Chevalier and the next moment all those charming bodies fell upon him. They were in front of him, behind him, hanging round his shoulders, smiling at him, congratulating him, even kissing him, and he was at his wits' end how to escape from them when a gentleman forced his way through the crowd.

"They seem to be suffocating you, Chevalier."

"Du Barry!"

It was indeed the Count, with two girls, one on either arm, to give him balance, as he put it.

"So you're at it again," he said. "You'll end by destroying the whole population."

"The worst of it is I have another creature to kill."

He pushed aside the women and the flunkies, who had suddenly become most respectful, and looked round for the wall-eyed man.

"Where's that damned spy?" he shouted.

"Never mind. You'll find him again," said du Barry. He pushed forward his two captives. "Look!" he said. "Here's to-day's catch!"

"Well done!"

"Unfortunately, not up to the standard of my partner at the ball."

And he whispered, "Oh! Chevalier, if only you were a woman. The Kingdom would be at our feet at this moment. Have you heard anything from the authorities?"

"No one has said anything to me about the Bastille so far."

"The Prince would have known it if they meant to lock us up. You were a success, Chevalier."

"Well! I made them laugh."

"That's the main thing. You'll get there before me."

"Maybe. But as you will succeed through the women, no one will be able to get rid of you. And at the Court it is not so much getting there as staying there that counts."

Just then du Barry noticed the women who were following them like a couple of bitches.

"We'll see you soon, my dears," he said, "at the sign of the One-eyed Bird in the Palais-Royal. We will dine together."

He turned his back on them without more ado and, dragging Eon away from the last languishing glances of the clamorous gossips, he walked off with him.

The same evening, Conti, taking advantage of the fact that he was the only Prince of the Blood at the King's retiring audience, took the towel from the Chamberlain, as was his right, and as he handed it said to the King in a low voice, "Sire, I have found our man."

The King looked distrustfully at him; before answering, he wiped his face with the damp towel, according to custom, and dried it with the dry end.

But Conti went on: "Only I must first ask Your Majesty if he intends to take any action about a little incident which happened at yesterday's ball?"

The King laughed heartily. "Good Lord, no!" he said. "One has so few chances of being amused. Life is so boring, Conti, don't you agree?"

Conti smiled his agreement and immediately added, "Well, Sire, that is the man in question."

The King laughed, then stood quite still, holding in his hand the glass of wine which had just been poured for him, lost in his thoughts. Conti guessed what was in his mind. He had seen Eon in woman's clothes, but had never seen him otherwise, and he could not accustom himself to the idea that he was

indeed a man. In spite of what he knew, the picture in his mind still roused the instincts of the pursuing male, mixed with the good-natured contempt which he had for all women. At last he emerged from his reverie and said to Conti in a languid voice, "Well, why not?"

But as he said it his eyes were strangely cold.

## CHAPTER V

# His Majesty's Secret Service

EON HAD NOT seen Mme de Pompadour again, nor was he anxious to do so. At the moment his conceit had been flattered by the idea of possessing the King's mistress. But now, sitting in Mme de Rochefort's drawing-room, he remembered those almost transparent hands with their blue veins, and that thin body with its feverish, uneasy movements. And when he lifted his eyes from that vision and gazed at his friend's quiet face bent over her embroidery his pride soon ebbed away. Mme de Pompadour had not reminded him of her existence and certainly the Chevalier was not grieved by her silence.

"What are you thinking about, my Cherub?"

Her Cherub, vaguely poking the fire as he so often did, was not thinking about anything worth talking of. He did not feel at all inclined to offer any confidences; he was glad to be left in peace beside the woman he loved.

"There are rumours of my Cherub having been extraordinarily foolish."

"Unfortunately, they are well founded, Madame."

Mme de Rochefort shook her head, "And still no question of the Bastille?"

"Not so far."

"Heavens, how good-natured the King is! It looks as if we were going to come off scot free!"

"I hope so, Madame, and how happy I am not to have to leave your side."

Mme de Rochefort laughed, and Eon laughed with her; but very soon he became serious again. He was thinking over his strange conversation with Conti. The Prince had spoken to the King. But would the King, however much he might have been amused by the adventure at the ball, be willing to play so big a game with so small a pawn? In his more optimistic moments

Eon felt that he had his feet on the first rung of a ladder whose top was lost in the clouds.

"My Cherub is dreaming of love."

"True, Madame, and you know of whose love."

"Spoken like my Cherubin. But I feel there is something more. Can it be ambition that is troubling him?"

"Indeed, I am afraid so."

"Well, think of that!"

"After all, Madame, I am no longer a child."

"I know it only too well," she said, lifting her eyes from her work with a glance which was both affectionate and anxious. "And that is why . . ."

She paused and Eon broke in, a more urgent note in his voice: "Suppose, Madame, that some fine offer was made to me to undertake a journey to . . . where shall we say? Perhaps Siam; what would you think of that, Madame? Or India? Or, if I cannot visit the Great Mogul, I would be satisfied with the Grand Turk. I see myself arriving, booted to the knees, in tight breeches, and exchanging them for baggy trousers, a little coat and heelless slippers. Or perhaps a pair of charming red or green shoes like those M. Passeleu brought for you from those parts, a year or two ago. Then, with a turban, an aigrette and a scimitar, I should be the very image of one of Molière's Turks. You remember, Madame, in the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*. I should be a *mama-mouchin*—that is what they call their officers—in command of janissaries or spahis. I might even govern a province, order worthy citizens to be beaten, and cut off a few heads. I agree that one must have a beard to play the part and I have none. But wig-makers are there, after all, just as here, and besides a beard may not be necessary if I get as far as the court of the Great Mogul . . . or even the Emperor of China? Have you nothing to say, Madame?"

"What am I to say, when you tell me you wish to leave me? Very well, sir, go . . . go and never let me see you again!"

Suddenly he looked like a little boy pleading for forgiveness. "Me! Leave you?"

She burst out laughing. "You take everything literally."

"I know I'm stupid," he said. "But all the same it's true

enough that I long to do something. To travel the world, to fight."

"You should read the *Deux Pigeons*."

"Oh, yes, I know. I shall probably come back with one wing broken and a dragging foot. And how you will laugh when you see me then."

"My dear Chevalier, you make me out a monster when I am really the gentlest and tenderest of friends. My dear, I would never urge you to neglect any opportunity which you are offered. Won't you please tell me whether you have had such an offer, and if so what and who makes it?"

She had put down her embroidery and was looking anxiously at Eon. He got up, came behind his friend's chair and leant on the back of it. There was no sound in the room but the crackling of the fire. Bending over Mme de Rochefort, savouring the perfume of her skin, he whispered in her ear, "I am waiting for this evening . . ."

"For your opportunity?"

He nodded and added emphatically, "For my fortune."

"Cherub, take it with both hands . . ."

"Madame, you know little of me if you think I will let it slip. I shall seize it by the mane as one seizes a horse and leap into the saddle and I shall not dismount till I am thrown by force."

The Countess gave him a long look. "And to think that I took you for a child!"

He smiled, the rather forced smile of a young soldier who sees himself another Alexander the Great.

"You may kiss me," she said. "You have earned the right."

Two hours later Eon was galloping towards Versailles. He had had a note from Conti: "Take a horse from my stables and come to Versailles, but see to it that you do not arrive there till the middle of the night, after the King has retired. You will be met at the gates near the main entrance."

Versailles! At that time of night!

It was pitch dark, with a high wind blowing. All along the road dogs barked at the rhythmic hoof-beats. When he passed the barracks he could not see from one end of the square to the other, but a few minutes later the moon rose.

"I can only have been sent for to see the King," said Eon to



himself, and his whole body shivered with excitement so that he felt almost ill. The Court of Honour was deserted; in the distance he heard the tread of sentries on their beat; small groups of courtiers were crossing the Marble Court, coming back, as Eon told himself, from the King's bedchamber, where the last audience had just finished. At the gate to which he had been directed he saw two men. "The Prince is expecting me," he said.

One of the men took his horse, the other, after giving the password, walked ahead in complete silence. Eon thought he knew this huge palace with its countless doors, its winding passages and hidden corridors with their doors ajar, but every time he went there he managed to lose himself. Now, in the dark night, if he had been left there alone he told himself that he would certainly have lain down on the ground and slept till morning rather than waste time trying to find his way out of the maze. So he kept as close as he could to his guide and devoted his whole attention to avoiding stumbling over a step or hitting his head against a hanging lamp. When he saw the beginning of one little windowless passage he chuckled to himself, wondering if he was on the way to the boudoir and its famous sofa. A moment later he found himself at that very door, which was thrown open before he had time to dwell on his memories of the ball. But this time there was no Pompadour and no King. In their place the Prince de Conti was sitting on the sofa with his legs crossed. On either side of him was a stranger. The one on the right was tall and grey with sombre eyes which suggested a shrewd and calculating nature. On the left was a great, strong redhead with a florid face, whom Eon guessed to be an Englishman. All three of them were as silent as if they were in a church. Eon effaced himself in a corner of the room, and a moment later discovered the identity of one of the strangers, for Conti, in resuming his interrupted conversation with the man on his right, addressed him as Monsieur Tercier.

Tercier was practically unknown to the general public, but as a Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who kept his office while ministers came and went, he was the mainspring of the government as far as foreign policy was concerned. Eon, knowing this, said to himself, "So this is the

beginning of the great adventure. But what is the ginger-haired Englishman doing here?"

At that moment Tercier whispered to Conti, and Eon, whose hearing was extremely keen, caught the words, "My Lord, this is a child," to which Conti replied in an even lower voice, "A child who will show the way to many a man."

Eon kept his eyes lowered and pretended to be counting the cracks in the parquet floor. Then, a page, no bigger than Eon and not nearly so attractive, slipped through the half-open door and bowed to Conti. The Prince rose and the others followed him.

They went down the passage to a door where they were stopped by a Swiss sentry. The Chevalier felt instinctively that behind that door was the King himself; but he was completely self-possessed, and Tercier, who had been scrutinizing him closely, no longer thought of him as a mere child. He saw that Eon's face was serious, his mouth firm and his eyes guarded, that he was wholly on the alert against anything which might befall.

Suddenly the door opened. The Prince went in first, followed by Tercier and the Englishman, Eon, coming behind the red-head, could see nothing for a moment except his haunches and his legs, so deep was his salutation. Then Eon in his turn made his ceremonious bow as a man of breeding should, after which he stood at attention, his hat under his arm and his head slightly bent in token of respect, and waited.

Louis XV sat with his hand resting on the table. He looked searchingly at Eon.

"This, Sire," said Tercier, "is the Chevalier Douglas, the Jacobite gentleman of which I have spoken to Your Majesty."

The red-haired Englishman bowed.

"And this is the Chevalier d'Eon."

He was going to say something more by way of introduction when the King interrupted him.

"I know the Chevalier," he said with a smile.

Eon knew perfectly well what was going on in the King's mind. Louis was making a comparison between the girl whom he had tumbled on the sofa and the Chevalier who stood before him. He was trying to reconcile the reality of this small but

well-built, vigorous lad with the picture of the lively and quick-witted young woman who—if only for a few seconds—had put up so stout a resistance.

In spite of the highly coloured picture drawn of him by the generation which succeeded his death and accepted without question by nineteenth-century opinion, Louis XV was neither idle, lethargic nor inefficient. On the contrary, he had an extremely acute understanding of European affairs, kept a keen eye on what was going on, and showed foresight and shrewdness in his plans for the future. In the privacy of his own study he was a bold thinker and worked out many ingenious plans, but in the presence of officialdom he became timid. The ministers whom he placed in office usually tried to have things their own way. Louis watched them and was amused by the sight. Lack of will-power often combated his intelligence and his sceptical outlook did the rest. When he realized that a man had exhausted his energy or outlived his popularity so that his continuance in office was useless or dangerous, he promptly got rid of him without the slightest consideration for past services or even personal friendship. But until they fell, so to speak, of their own accord, Louis did not dare to dismiss his ministers—he merely had them watched. Eon sensed that Louis was a born bureaucrat, a notion supported by the glimpse he had of another little room behind the King, which seemed to be packed with files and papers, many of them orderly arranged on the full shelves of several cupboards. This room in fact held an account of all the resources of France, the figures of the national budget and countless calculations, ideas for raising money, statements of expenditure, plans for the future, summaries, lists and all the paper-work of Government; it was the hidden laboratory of the Royal power.

Eon knew the King's official ministers well enough; he had watched their self-important progress through the corridors of Versailles. But here before him were two hidden advisers whom the King was accustomed to consult at night behind closed doors. And he realized the strange fact that both these men were enemies of the favourite with whom Louis XV passed half his time and whose company seemed to be an essential part of his life. Conti had told him enough at their last interview

to let him see that France maintained throughout Europe a double system of representation. Side by side with the official ambassadors was a secret network of unknown men. The ambassadors reported to the titular Minister, the others to the head of the King's own secret service. "What a queer game," he said to himself, "and how amusing to play a part in this mystery, to feel one's way among these shadows. Really, it is one long masquerade." The word reminded him of the ball, and he felt that the ball was still going on. But on what a scale, with whole peoples as spectators, kings and their ministers as guests and the stars of Heaven for lamps!

All the same, he was a little disappointed. There was no one there but Conti and Tercier, unless you counted the strange creature whom he now knew to be Douglas. No sign of the Prince de Broglie, who was said to be the King's closest friend and who, it was rumoured, was now in Warsaw. Above all no sign of Mme de Pompadour, for whose appearance the Chevalier, rather foolishly perhaps, had been waiting. "When I see her again," he said to himself, "I shall have to guard my tongue. But shall I ever see her again?"

"Is everything ready?" asked the King, and Eon pricked up his ears.

"Sire," said Tercier, with a particularly deep bow, "you see here the Chevalier Douglas, related to those Douglasses and Mackenzies who have always given faithful service to the Stuarts. The Chevalier, though English, is a good Catholic and he hates his heretical fellow countrymen who uphold the man who at present reigns in London."

The Secretary turned towards the Prince.

"I have every confidence," took up Conti, "in recommending the Chevalier Douglas to Your Majesty. This will not be his first employment of the kind. I know him well and he has all the qualities of courage, intelligence and discretion which are needed to carry out his mission."

After a pause of a few seconds Tercier took up the theme again. "The Chevalier Douglas is going to St. Petersburg under the pretext of buying furs. Once there, he will gather information as to the strength and disposition of Russia and the various influences operating at the Empress Elizabeth's

Court. The Prince de Conti himself has drawn up his instructions."

He handed the King the notebook. Louis took it and rested his elbow on it. "I shall read this to-night," he said.

"But," went on Tercier, "remembering the marked weakness which Her Russian Majesty has always shown for everything French and particularly for everything connected with Versailles"—here the King smiled—"we thought it would be a good thing to give the Chevalier Douglas a French companion who would be able to second his activities and who might perhaps succeed by the use of an entirely new stratagem in escaping the trap into which M. de Valcroissant fell."

"And for this purpose," interrupted Conti, "I thought of the Chevalier d'Eon."

Eon bowed, and again the King smiled.

"We suggest," went on Tercier, "that the Chevalier Douglas should set off as an ordinary traveller with the usual passport, and that the Chevalier d'Eon, in order to escape the fate of M. de Valcroissant, should go with him—and the Prince tells me that this will not surprise Your Majesty—disguised as his niece, Léa de Beaumont."

"The disguise will be impenetrable," said the King.

Eon, bowing once more, thought to himself, "Now I am really caught. I shall never escape from the petticoats they are putting on me."

"The uncle and niece," went on Tercier (and once more the King smiled, as did Conti and Douglas and, in the end, Tercier himself, while Eon's face remained impassive), "the uncle and niece will enter Germany by way of Swabia. They will interest themselves in mines and pass as mineralogists. From there they will go on to Bohemia and then to Saxony, visiting mines on the way, and finally they will reach Danzig by way of Pomerania and Brandenburg. In Danzig, Douglas will have an opportunity to study the disputes between the local magistrates and the citizens."

"Your Majesty," interrupted Conti, "has been pleased to tell me that these disputes are of interest to you."

Louis nodded.

"From Danzig," said Tercier, "they will go on to Prussia

and then to Courland. There they can find out what the local noblemen think of the deposition and exile of the Duke of Courland and the attitude of the Russian minister. Finally, they will reach St. Petersburg. There, Chevalier Douglas will be able to see Williams, the English Ambassador at the Court of Russia, provided, of course, as I understand from him is the case, that Williams does not know him."

This time it was Douglas who bowed and Tercier asked, "Should he see Broglie at Warsaw on the way?"

"Certainly not!" said the King hurriedly.

Louis' passion for secrecy was such that he did not wish his agent in Russia to know what his fellow in Poland was doing, and conversely, even though as a result the two men might gainsay each other. Eon smiled to himself as he realized this. "It all helps to make the game more amusing," he thought.

"The Chevalier Douglas," went on Tercier, "will communicate with us in the following manner. He will send his reports, briefly written in small characters, in a tortoiseshell snuffbox with a false bottom. Any messenger can bring it us. Furthermore, he will make use of code words. As he is going there to trade in furs, it is agreed that he will use the names of various furs to indicate anything which he wishes to keep secret. Thus 'black fox' will mean the English Ambassador and 'fox is very dear' will mean that his influence is powerful. 'Ermine' will stand for the Old Russian party, the men who dislike the idea of alliance with France. Thus by 'Ermine is fashionable' we shall understand that these are in the ascendant. 'Lynx' will particularly apply to the Austrian party; 'Lynx is fetching a good price' will tell us that it carries the day. The Chancellor Bestoucheff will be represented by 'sable,' and if we are told that 'sables are cheap' we shall know that his power is weakening. Finally, we shall speak of the Russian soldiers as 'skins of grey squirrels' and it will be understood that one skin will stand for 3,000 men."

All this discussion seemed to cause the King the most pleasurable excitement, and Eon was astonished to find in him a man of hidden activities, who delighted in the tactics of mine and countermine. His Majesty was an arch-intriguer.

After Tercier's statement, a few questions on matters of

detail were asked and answered, and then there was a longish silence, which the King broke by asking: "What about M. de Rouille?" This was the Minister for Foreign Affairs.

"He knows," said Tercier, "that Your Majesty is anxious to find out what is going on in Russia; he knows of the existence of the Chevalier Douglas, but not of that of the Chevalier d'Eon."

Eon was struck by the attitude of the Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in speaking of his chief. It would be impossible to have a better illustration of what in the Conti-Brogie clique was known as the King's Secret Service.

"And the Marquise?" was the King's next question.

Eon examined his face, but it was without expression either of suspicion or of anxiety as to what the minister's answer would be. The man certainly knew how to control his emotions.

"Mme la Marquise knows about the Chevalier d'Eon's mission," answered Tercier, "but the Prince de Conti's instructions in regard to it have not been made known to her."

"Good," said the King, and Eon noticed the hint of a smile of satisfaction.

"In fact," said Eon to himself, "convinced though she may be of my discretion, she would rather have me devil-knows-where than at Versailles."

Throughout this conversation the King never took his eyes off the Chevalier, and now there could be no doubt that it was his male instinct which was roused, just as if the man he saw before him had been nothing more or less than a young woman in disguise. It was possible after all—and Eon noticed the frown which for a moment passed over his face—that he had been fooled. But the moment after the King recovered his quizzical and slightly questioning air. Tercier, used to reading his master's face, noticed all this and hastened to assure him: "The Chevalier d'Eon is entirely at Your Majesty's service, whatever your orders may be."

Eon bowed and smiled, but his smile was rueful and the keen glint of his eyes led the King to realize that he would like to speak for himself.

"Is that true, Chevalier?" he asked amiably. "Tell me what you really think."

"Sire," replied Eon, "seeing that I am ready to go to the ends of the world in Your Majesty's service, the journey to St. Petersburg is but a small test of my devotion, but I must confess to Your Majesty that I would rather travel under a soldier's helmet than a woman's head-dress."

"Nonsense," said the King. "What you wear on your head is not important—provided the soldier is beneath it."

With that he rose to his feet and as the others bowed he turned on his heel and went back into his private room. The four men relaxed and Conti laid his hands on Eon's shoulders with a smile. "Well, Chevalier, there you are with a wonderful adventure ahead of you. You have now only to buy your trousseau."



## CHAPTER VI

# A Strange Host

MME DE ROCHEFORT had taken Eon some distance in her own carriage. But above Vaujours it was high time for them to part. Behind the drawn curtains of the coach they embraced again and again.

"All my thoughts shall be of you," Eon kept saying. "I shall have you always by my side."

And she answered, "My Cherub, if you love me, take good care of yourself, for if you die I too shall die."

When at last he tore himself from her arms and stood by the roadside bowing as if in adoration, she flung herself back in the carriage in a flood of tears.

A heavy coach bore Eon along the elm-bordered high road from Paris to Metz. It was a fine road, with no ruts in it, but paved throughout its length with large, smooth cobbles from which the horses' shoes struck sparks. On the level stretches the postilions trotted, and on the hills they slackened to a walk; if the hill was a long one, the travellers left the carriage and stretched their legs till they reached the top. At every posting station a crowd gathered round them as soon as they stopped. Eon watched with amusement the salutations of the postmaster and the innkeeper, the quaint sights of the countryside, the clothes of the local great ladies, the simple air of the young girls in their clogs, while in the background dogs barked and children shouted. The blacksmith laid his hammer on his anvil and came over in his leather apron to look at the horses and by his side came the carpenter to examine the coach. Suddenly a bell sounded the Angelus; the men took off their hats and everyone crossed himself. Whenever Eon showed himself at the carriage door there was always a man, however humbly clad, gallantly waiting to help the lady down. He had had to accustom himself to resting a tiny foot delicately on the step and leaning for support on the first hand that was offered. The young men stared

at the half-seen ankles, at the well-corseted waist and the pretty face with a patch at the corner of the eye; the women were fascinated by the kid shoes embroidered in silver showing under the dress of grey taffeta, of a shade which would not show the dust of the road.

In spite of all this the journey was becoming tedious. Douglas was a cheerful companion as long as he was kept amused by stories, but he was not particularly intelligent and the rhythm of the horses' hoofs soon lulled him to sleep. When he became sleepy, Eon gave himself up to his dreams of the future, and when he snored Eon whistled. The rest of the time the Chevalier spent reading Montesquieu's *L'Esprit des Lois*, which is certainly a very good book, but not one of those books to which pretty women generally fly for amusement. Douglas made a face when he saw his companion absorbed in it.

"Do you think," he asked, "that that is the sort of book a well-born young lady would be likely to read?"

"Certainly it is," answered Eon. "Everyone knows that many girls nowadays are well-educated, more so in fact than a great many men. You must realize that I am one of that kind."

Douglas shrugged his shoulders.

The view of France through which they were passing was a joy to the eye. They had left the country of Brie and Soissons behind and were entering Champagne. The corn was ripening fast, the rye was already ripe. Cherry trees hung their branches heavy with red fruit over the walls. Every village had its steeple, and sometimes two or three pierced the distant sky. A light breeze played with the tendrils of the vines. Cows grazed in the meadows and the village folk set down their wheelbarrows to salute the travellers as they passed. In the background a little river wound its graceful way, so that it seemed as though one saw the curves of a woman's arm hidden in the green grass behind the poplar trees.

The travellers' first two nights had been uneventful. The first was spent at Château Thierry, the second at Chalons. Douglas pretended to be anxious about his niece's welfare and Eon lent himself with amusement to the comedy; round his neck he wore a cross which had belonged to his mother. The third day was thundery and there were several heavy showers.

After a gloomy morning spent in crossing the muddy flats of Champagne, whose monotony was broken only occasionally by a few clumps of pine trees among whose trunks they could see big flocks of sheep, they lunched hungrily at Sainte-Menehould. The distant view was intercepted by a dense forest, the sight of which made Douglas frown anxiously. Eon looked at him in surprise. "Have you nothing like that in England?" he asked.

"Certainly we have," answered Douglas. "But these forests look more forbidding than our Welsh woods or even than the wildest country of the Scottish highlands."

He was particularly worried by the attitude of the postilions. He had seen one of them talking to a serving-man who had slipped away as he came near them, and he had heard another quarrelling with someone behind the house. But he shook his head and reproached himself for his vague uneasiness as he stepped into the coach.

He had not long to wait before his fears were justified. As they went down a steep hill just before reaching Bar-le-Duc one of the horses fell. The travellers were violently flung against the panels of the coach. Douglas let fly a volley of oaths, but when Eon joined in the Englishman broke off at once and hissed at him, "Be quiet! For Heaven's sake, remember who you are!"

Eon was about to answer him in very soldierly terms when the postilion put his head in at the door, crying that this was the devil's work; his mate had been thrown to the ground and cut his knee open, and one of the horses was so completely broken-kneed that it would have to be dragged by the bridle. In fact there was no hope of reaching Bar-le-Duc.

"The best thing the gentleman and the young lady can do," said this fellow, "is to make their way to the outskirts, about a mile away, and pray to Heaven to find them a lodging, for the fair is on and when you get there night will have fallen and all the inns will be full. As for me, I am going to take a horse and hasten in search of a doctor for my mate."

It was true enough that the other postilion seemed to be in a very bad way. Although protected by a strong high-boot, his knee had suffered severely; the man was groaning, his face was white as a sheet and his breeches had a large blood-stain on

them. Douglas, without bothering to answer, mounted one of the horses and, taking up Eon (clutching to him his *Esprit des Lois*) behind, went off at a smart pace towards Bar-le-Duc, followed by the uninjured postilion, to whom he had thrown his purse. This man left them as soon as he saw a doctor's pole.

The postilion had been right about the fair, and when they got to the town all the people of the countryside were there, eating, drinking and shouting. There was no question even of a bed, much less of a room. They were offered a corner in a stable once or twice, but most people merely shut the door in their faces. As for the solid citizens of the town, they were finishing their evening meals behind bolted doors; some of them were already in bed, like their own hens. Douglas pushed on as far as he could until they came to what seemed to be the last house. Seen in the gathering dark it looked respectable enough; it was low-built and was separated from its neighbours by a little garden and a coppice. A light showed in the windows.

He dismounted and knocked. After some delay the door opened wide, but with disconcerting slowness, and a man appeared. Frankly, one would have been more inclined to call the apparition a cupboard than a man, for the fellow was completely square. He seemed to be all torso. His legs were short, but there was more than a hint of muscle in them. As for his arms, the muscles rose in great lumps under his vest. A square head rested on an enormous neck. His eyes were large, steady and cold, without any trace of feeling. "The eyes of a wild beast," thought Douglas.

In a few words Douglas explained their plight, saying that he was a gentleman, that he had met with an accident and that he and his niece were completely exhausted and could not find a lodging. All they wanted, he said, was some food and two beds and they were willing to pay handsomely for it.

The man smiled with a trace of embarrassment. "It is not my business, sir, nor is it my custom (he emphasized the word) to take in guests, but to oblige you . . ."

He came forward, waved them in, and went off to attend to the horse.

Douglas and Eon found themselves in a low room lit by a

candle and by the glow from the fireplace, where a steaming bowl of soup hung from the hook of the pot-hanger. The room was furnished in peasant fashion with a big table, a kneeding trough and a primitive dresser. They sensed that behind a red curtain at one side was the entrance to another room, in which no doubt the family slept. In front of the fire, on a stool, sat an old hag, with bloodshot face and rheumy eyes who looked at them from under lowered eyelids without saying a word.

When the man came back, they sat down at the table. He was a taciturn fellow who said hardly a dozen words during the meal. The food, which was good enough in its way, was of the kind eaten by humble folk in those days—a vegetable soup, a piece of boiled beef, some cheese and a plate of cherries. The newcomers were as silent as their hosts. The man ate greedily, swallowing enormous hunks of bread and washing it down with glass after glass of the little local wine. The wine was acid and everyone swallowed it like water, but it had a deceptive strength of which the travellers soon became aware. In an effort to draw out their host, Douglas produced two crown pieces and slipped them to the old woman who thereupon hastily took up an armful of clean sheets and carried these up into the attic.

Just as they were eating the last of the cherries there was a knock on the door. The knocking was hesitant, as if the person were frightened. The man immediately stopped chewing and made a sign to his wife, and with astonishing speed Douglas and Eon found themselves being pushed into the other room, behind the curtain.

"Get right into the back," hissed the woman, "and sit on the bed."

"This is a queer house," whispered Eon.

"I have my pistols with me," answered Douglas in a low voice.

Douglas sat on the bed as he had been told to do, but Eon quickly slipped off his shoes and reached the curtain in his stockinged feet. Finding a convenient hole, he put his eye to it, and saw a woman come in to the other room. Her face wore an expression of horror; it was thickly painted, but under the paint the flesh looked almost green. The effect was horrible,

especially as she rolled her eyes till the whites showed and her lips trembled as if she was about to faint.

"Pull yourself together," said the man. "After all, I am a man, like any other man."

"I'll get you a little sup, my poor Jeanette," added the woman.

Jeanette thanked her and threw herself into a chair. After quickly swallowing a few mouthfuls of liquor, she recovered herself and smiled at them. "It was only that I was surprised," she said.

Certainly there did not seem to be anything frightful in the man at whom she was looking. All she saw was a big, solid man, rough-hewn and with a face which was not so much hard as impassive. Yet no one could feel at ease under the gaze of those inhuman eyes, any more than a mouse between the paws of a cat.

The old woman remained standing in the background clutching her bottle, which she patted affectionately, while the man lying well back in his wooden armchair waited patiently till the visitor was ready to talk. At last she said, "I have come about Maître Cornavin's son."

"Ah," grunted the man.

The girl Jeanette sighed. She looked like what she no doubt was. Her cheeks were daubed with paint and straying locks of hair had been pushed back anyhow under her bonnet. By nature she was a good-looking fair girl; at the moment she wore a striped scarf over her shoulders and a red petticoat and her stockings, neat but darned, were completed by high-heeled shoes, intended to make the most of her figure.

"She's a professional," whispered Eon from his peephole where Douglas by now was standing close to him.

They noticed that the man was licking his lips, either from an impulse of sensuality or perhaps because such women, then as now, had the reputation of paying well and being generous to a fault.

"It's to-morrow, isn't it?" asked the woman in an agitated voice.

"Unfortunately, yes!" answered the man.

"Are you going to make him suffer?"

"Why should I, my good girl? I know my business."

Behind the curtain Douglas and Eon gripped one another's hands, as they realized that they were the hangman's guests.

"Oh," said she, "he is such a good man. I wouldn't like him to suffer. No, I wouldn't like it at all."

With that she launched out on a long recital of the young man's story. It seemed that he was the eldest son of Cornavin, the master clockmaker, and would have succeeded his father in his shop on the Market Square and doubtless have ended a churchwarden. Alas! in spite of being married, and well married, to the daughter of a master-cobbler (and although his wife was quarrelsome, no one could deny that she was a good housewife), he had chosen to go his own way, gambling, drinking, fighting, and leading a life of debauchery. Until, at last, during a brawl he had so roughly handled a travelling hawker that the man had died, and now young Cornavin, whom all the girls called "Heart's Delight," was sentenced to be hanged.

"I know all that, my dear," said the hangman.

Jeanette made a little gesture of excuse. "Of course you do, Machavent, but what I want to know"—she lowered her voice—"what I want to know is whether I can count on you?"

The man raised his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders. "Good Lord, every man who is hanged goes to the next world, as you should know, my good girl, and I cannot prevent Heart's Delight from dying, though I can decide whether he shall die quickly or not."

Jeanette thrust her hand into the inner pocket of her dress. "I have here," she said, "twenty crowns."

"Twenty crowns?"

"Yes, twenty crowns—twenty shining crowns, stamped with the head of the late King or of his present Majesty, never used and freshly minted, crowns of the full legal weight and value."

The hangman blinked and, stretching out his great hand, big enough to throttle a calf, he took the little leather bag, opened it, counted the coins, put them back again and with a final sigh dropped the bag and all into his pocket. "Wife," he said, "show us the nooses."

The hangman's wife put her bottle down hastily and opened a drawer, from which she took a bundle of nooses and threw

them on her husband's lap. The girl looked at them with horror.

"There is the thickest one," said the hangman. "Good enough for a peasant. With that you must count up to a hundred before the man dies—and even so you have to pull him by the legs. Here is a thinner one. And the third, which I recommend, and which shall be yours, my girl, since you are willing to pay for it, is finer still."

"You are sure it won't break?" asked the girl, who already saw Heart's Delight being hanged, unhanged and hanged all over again. And she looked closely at the noose, but her lips were dry and she dared not touch it.

"Don't worry," said the hangman. "You can trust Machavent. For I come of an honest family who have been hangmen from father to son, and when I make a promise I keep it."

Just then there was another knock on the door, but this time it was unhesitating and peremptory. This was no suppliant knocking, but some one sure of himself and accustomed to be obeyed.

"We're having plenty of trouble to-night," grumbled the old woman, and, taking the girl by the shoulders, she pushed her under the table, where she crouched on her knees. She was only just in time. Fortunately, the only light in the room was one guttering candle and, now that the soup had been disposed of, the fire had been allowed to sink (for it was a warm summer night) to a few smouldering embers which were already covered with ash.

"Good day!" said a harsh voice.

"Good day!" answered the hangman politely. He had opened the door and now stood hat in hand before a woman who came in with a mastiff at her heels.

The newcomer was a short, raddled woman with keen eyes and a wrinkled face. She seated herself at the table without ceremony on the stool which Jeanette had not dared to take.

"Machavent," she said, "from what I have seen, you receive visitors."

"Well, there's no law against that."

"No, but it would seem that your visitors are like cats. They come in by the door and go out by the window."



"Perhaps so. But we all may welcome anyone we please."

The woman sneered. "That's so, no doubt. But do you know who came in here, under my very eyes? That woman Jeanette, the trollop who seduced my husband, Pierre Cornavin."

"Maybe you made a mistake."

"Certainly," broke in the hangman's wife, "you must have made a mistake."

"I made no mistake," said the woman. "Please understand that I am Pierre Cornavin's wife. And I have come here, to Bar-le-Duc, from my father's house—why do you think, Machavent? To see my husband hang."

The hangman raised his hands. "There are people who are amused by such things."

"I shall certainly be amused, Machavent, for since I married him I have lost my dowry, my cash, my ear-rings and even my wedding-ring—to say nothing of my clothes and all my chattels. And my body is still black and blue with bruises which he gave me."

"Well, everybody leads his family life according to his own ideas."

The woman went on without listening to him. "Ten years of pain, I have had, and one moment's pleasure. Obviously for him it has been the opposite: ten years of pleasure and one moment of pain. But I have no intention of letting anybody rob me of my pleasure. That is all I've left to hope for now that I live on the charity of my father, the cobbler, who showed no great pleasure in taking me back. Anyhow, it was Jeanette whom I saw coming in here and I shall denounce her to the authorities and see that the drab is gaoled. And I shall tell them, my good man, and, if need be, swear before God—for it's true enough, isn't it—that she came here to seduce you too."

"That's a pack of lies," cried the old woman.

Mme Cornavin shrugged her shoulders. "I know what I am talking about. Obviously she wasn't trying to seduce him by way of her job. He's too sensible a fellow to touch a hussy like that. But when it comes to offering him . . ." She made a sign with her finger and thumb, "How many crowns was it?"

The hangman did not move a muscle. But just then the dog, which was lying close to the woman's side began to growl at

her. She struck it on the head with the flat of her hand. "Quiet, Faraud!" And then, as she stretched out her leg, she touched a body.

"Hey!" she cried, jumping to her feet. "There is someone under the table."

Thereupon Jeanette came out, swearing lustily. But before she had even got to her feet, Mme Cornavin leapt at her and bore her to the ground.

"Oh! you strumpet, you whore! I've got you now—now I'll show you!"

She was much the stronger of the two, and, taking the girl by the hair, she punched her with her fist as hard as she could. She continued to knock her about for at least five minutes, while the hangman and his wife looked on without attempting to interfere. They were used to seeing others punished much more drastically than this. Behind the curtain Eon was seething, but Douglas held him back, whispering urgently to him, "Don't move. Don't move."

At last, after a torrent of oaths, when Jeanette had succeeded in hitting back and biting for good measure, the dark woman made an end of her blonde rival and threw her out of the door, with the dog snapping at her heels. Then the victor banged the door, came back, and said to the hangman, "Well, I shall leave here with a few scratches on my face, but anyhow I've won the day. Now, tell me, Machavent, how many crowns did that harlot give you? And what crowns," she was suddenly overcome by fury, "earned in what manner—in whose bed or hay-loft? Eh? I know that money never smells . . ."

"Oh well," said the hangman, "we all earn our living in our own way."

"How many crowns?"

"Thirty . . . word of honour!"

"She was generous. What did she want of you?"

"It was for the noose."

The woman stared at him, and he began a clumsy explanation. At length, as he found difficulty in getting out his words, he showed her the nooses:

"There you are—one, two, three!"

"Who would have thought it?" said Mme Cornavin, "Oh

well, I got here just in time. She wanted the finest one, so that everything would be over in a moment. But she reckoned without me. It must be the thickest one, Machavent, for my good man—the thickest one.”

Behind the curtain Eon gave a gasp of rage.

“You seem to have rats in the house,” said the visitor.

The hangman’s wife hastened to agree. “Oh yes, my dear, rats—plenty of them.” She showed the black stumps of her teeth in a hideous smile.

“The thickest one,” went on the visitor. “Did you say she gave you thirty crowns? Well, there are sixty. Is that enough? But mind you, I don’t intend to be tricked. I’ll take the others with me and give them back to you when the ceremony is over.”

“Fair enough,” said the hangman.

She was going away with the nooses in her hand, but at the door she changed her mind, and, feeling in her pocket again, she said: “Here, Machavent, my father will beat me for this, but I am giving you another twenty—on condition that when my man is on the scaffold and just ready for his last jump, if he makes a face when he sees the noose, you’ll say to him, ‘This is your wife’s noose, Heart’s Delight, and it cost her eighty crowns.’ ” And with that she finally left, with her hair bristling as much as her dog’s coat.

The next moment Eon and Douglas sprang out from their hiding-place.

“Poor wretch of a man,” cried Douglas, “to be tied to a woman like that!”

But the Chevalier, planting himself squarely in front of the muscular monster who was at least a foot taller than he was, shouted at him, “Master hangman, I’m sorry to throw in your face that you’re a thoroughly dishonest fellow.” His eyes flashed, but the hangman, without answering, drew back the curtain from a small bed which the visitors had not noticed before and showed them the heads of three children, sleeping peacefully there. . . .

“How odd!” muttered Eon. “Even a hangman has children. But, at least,” he went on in a louder voice, “you must give the first woman back her money.”

"Oh, no!" said the hangman. "In the first place, she earns it easily enough and, besides, everybody will get some good out of it. Poor Heart's Delight will suffer from the heavy noose—that I can't help—but when he is on the scaffold, instead of saying what his wife told me to tell him, I shall say to him, 'Your sweetheart sends you her blessing, Heart's Delight'—and so he will die happy."

"You have a heart of gold," said the Chevalier.

The hangman bowed. "So they have always told me, Madame."

Eon and Douglas lay stretched out on the two beds which the woman had got ready in the attic. To call them beds was perhaps saying too much. Eon had something like a primitive camp-bed which creaked and groaned every time he moved, and Douglas had a straw mattress on the floor.

"Uncle and niece—it's all the same thing," the old woman had said, but nevertheless she had made a sort of screen, for decency's sake, by hanging a cloth between them.

Owing to the heat, the skylight was open. The two friends had laughed about this, saying the worst they had to fear was a cat or two.

But Eon could not sleep. The thought of the unknown Heart's Delight being not only hanged, but tortured, kept him awake. Suddenly, he saw a head against the opening of the skylight. As the moon was behind it, he saw only a silhouette. The shape swayed from side to side and a voice whispered, "Don't be frightened."

Thereupon a man slipped through the narrow opening and, after lifting the cloth as he passed, came and sat on Eon's bed. Eon was in a nightdress and a little muslin jacket.

"Don't be afraid, Madame," repeated the unknown man. "Don't say a word. I have business to do down below."

"With whom?" asked Eon.

"With the hangman." And, leaning over, he added, "Tomorrow they are going to hang a young man of great promise and he must be given a chance of delay."

"I see. And so?"

"Well, I am a friend of his—Bragard, from Salon in Provence

—and I am going to kill the hangman.” He waved a hammer. “It will take some time to find another, you know.”

Eon was already on his feet in his night-clothes. “I hope,” he thought, “that this young ruffian won’t be overcome by my charms. Anyhow, there is always my uncle.” He was amused by the adventure, although he realized the danger of getting himself, to say nothing of Douglas, involved in a matter of murder.

“My dear sir,” he said, “what a shocking ideal! To kill a man! What a way to go about things. You leave it to me and I will bring him up here. All that’s necessary is to meet him on the landing with this pistol in your hand, and prevent him from being a nuisance. All that matters is that he should not be able to hang your friend.”

The intruder bowed, civilly enough, and Eon started down the ladder. There was a flickering light below, and he saw the old woman rummaging about in a dark corner of the room. The hangman heard the stair creak and looked up. Eon beckoned to him and he hastened towards him. The sight of this young woman in her nightgown at the turn of the stairs brought the blood rushing to his face. He held out his hands, but Eon stopped him with a gesture. “Quiet! We must wait till your wife is asleep.”

He held out a flask of brandy. “Here is something that will make her sleep. When she begins to snore, come up here. But bring with you the rest of your nooses, for I am sure you didn’t give them all to that horrible woman and I’d like to see them.”

With that Eon gave the man a look which would have tempted a saint. A minute later he heard the sound of a glass being brought out of the cupboard and the hangman’s thick voice saying, “Come on, have a drink of this!” Then he heard a burst of laughter.

For half an hour Eon and Bragard waited, and Eon was terrified lest Douglas should wake. At last they heard the hangman’s heavy tread, and he came up, shading the candle with his hand. Through the half-open door he saw Eon, in his night-clothes, smiling at him. He took two steps towards him and held out his arms.

“Stay where you are,” hissed a voice, “or you’re dead.”

Bragard came forward with a pistol in each hand, pointing at him. The poor man's mouth dropped open.

"Be quiet. . . ."

Eon took the candle out of his hands and the stranger said, "If you stay quiet, you'll not be killed."

A hangman is not necessarily a stout-hearted man. This one was strong enough, but what good is muscle against pistols? He went weak at the knees and his lips began to quiver. Eon had already got hold of him and proceeded with diabolical skill to tie his hands behind him and then to truss his ankles and his legs. After which, he made a gag out of a handkerchief and forced it between the man's teeth. Amateurish though it was, it was a good gag which would not come undone and prevented any sound but a muffled groan.

"Put him in the hay-loft," ordered Eon.

Bragard shouldered the man and, though he staggered under his enormous bulk, contrived to get up the ladder. The next moment Eon joined him, and the Provençal tied his victim so skilfully and firmly to the centre beam that he had no hope of getting free unless someone came to the rescue. Everything was in trim. Down below, the drunken woman was sleeping off her brandy and the three children were peacefully dreaming.

"Sleep on the landing," said Eon to Bragard, throwing him the hangman's coat. "I have no other bed to offer you. Tomorrow we will talk things over."

Next morning, in the first glimmer of dawn, the Provençal awoke to find a young woman bending over him, who said: "Take the hangman's mask, put it on, and go to the Prefecture. Tell them that Machavent is ill, that you are his deputy and that you have his mask. Our policemen are not as wide awake as all that. If they ask you if you are a good hangman, you can show them your nooses and tell them you are as good as the next man. As for us, we are taking a carriage and going across the bridge. We will wait for you outside the town at the top of the hill on the road to Metz. If you succeed in escaping, you must join us there. At all events, you had better take the old woman's bonnet and her cloak for Heart's Delight, and I will supply you with a livery. It happens that I need a maid and my uncle needs a valet."

The Provençal was jumping for joy. "I've already got a horse," he said. "You'll see us on our Bucephalus. A fine pair, Madame, and I swear we shall give you satisfaction."

"Let's hope that all goes well. Good luck!"

The next thing was to wake up Douglas and to go out in search of the carriage and the postilions. The hurt man had been found a lodging in the barber's house, and as the postmaster had had everything put in order, they left on foot, giving orders for the carriage to pick them up at the top of the hill. When they got to the high ground, a few hundred yards outside the town, they could see the gibbet, which stood by itself, clear of all houses and trees, in a space which as yet was deserted.

The travellers fixed their eyes on this spot. First of all a company of soldiers arrived and disposed themselves in a leisurely manner round the foot of the gallows. Then came the police authorities, led by a few black-robed figures. Finally, came a second company of troops.

The custom in the Duchy of Bar was the same as in the rest of France; the hangman first mounted the ladder and helped the condemned man to climb up backwards. The victim wore two running nooses round his neck together with a third called the "throw" by which the hangman threw him off the scaffold.

The soldiers were resting on their arms, the public were staring at the scaffold and the police authorities were standing in a group a few feet away. They saw the hangman take the nooses off the condemned man's neck as if he wanted to readjust them and then, before the astonished onlookers realized what was happening, he cut the ropes with which the arms of Heart's Delight were bound and snatched off his own mask. Thereupon both men leapt from the scaffold and were swallowed up in the crowd. Soldiers and police were after them at once, but they were helpless, for the crowd, delighted at the escapade, had opened to let the fugitives pass through and then had closed again. It was a turbulent crowd, which hooted at the soldiers and the police, and here and there aimed blows at them. The authorities had no mounted men who might ride round it. The uproar increased every minute until it threatened a riot. Douglas and Eon, from their point of vantage, roared with laughter.

"By the way," said Eon suddenly, "don't you think it would be a good thing for us to have a servant or two with us—especially when we are crossing Germany?"

"I certainly do," said Douglas. "But how can we find the sort of people we want? All these fellows are given to stealing and spying. Besides, could we take them with us all the way to St. Petersburg?"

Eon shrugged his shoulders. "Let's think about Germany first. I have just had a curious pair recommended to me—a man and a woman. You will see them in a minute."

And at Douglas' look of astonishment he added with a laugh, "Well, after all don't you think I badly need a maid?"

Just at that moment a tall fellow came galloping up on a horse with a girl riding pillion.

"Here are my discoveries," said Eon.

<sup>k</sup> Bragard made a sweeping bow, and Heart's Delight, who looked a terrible sloven in the old woman's dress, did his best to curtsy.

Douglas made a wry face, "Regular gallows-birds," he grumbled, not realizing how truly he spoke. "And how are they to keep up with us?"

"Why, on horseback, of course," said Eon, "with the girl on the crupper, as they came here."

A minute or two later the coach came along and the travellers got into it and set off at a snart trot, with Bragard and Heart's Delight riding behind. The pretended hangman was laughing at the top of his bent as the intended victim whispered in his ear: "What gave me the greatest pleasure was the sight of my wife in the front row of the crowd and her face of rage when she saw me making my escape. Listen, my friend, to the birds. I never heard them sing so beautifully before."



## CHAPTER VII

# Bluebeard in the Forest

AFTER THEIR ADVENTURES in France our travellers got without further hindrance to Mainz, where they were most cordially received by the Elector. This great man, Prince and Archbishop both, had one god on earth—the King of France. For him there was only one place in the world where a man could wish to live, Versailles. He knew that he never would live there, and the knowledge drove him to despair. But he did the best he could, by basing his way of life on that of His Most Christian Majesty, and so far as his resources, augmented in some degree by a subsidy from the Court of France, allowed him to do so, he had set up a régime which was modelled, both on the civil and the military side, on that of Louis XV. As soon as any Frenchman set foot in his territory he was almost dragged to the Elector's palace. If he was a commoner, he was at least given all he wanted to eat and drink. But if he was a man of quality familiar with the gossip of Versailles, His Highness could never have enough of his company. The visitor had to lunch and dine with him, to go hunting at his side, to stroll through his gardens and look at his collections, to drink innumerable toasts, to listen to his musicians and dance at the court balls, and above all to talk about life at the Court of France. Tact demanded that he should murmur every now and then, as if it were a mere commonplace, "It is hard to realize that one is not at the King's Court. . . ."

Douglas and the Chevalier had eaten, drunk, paid visits, gone hunting, danced, talked and told stories to the utmost of their capacity. After a week of this they were satiated with courtesies and compliments and good Rhine wine and they were beginning to be heartily sick of Mainz and its Elector, of the memory of Versailles and many other such things.

One day Eon at last received the letter from Mme de

Rochefort for which he had been waiting anxiously. The letter was affectionate, but not excessively so; it spoke more of friendship than of love, for this tactful lady, having launched her Cherub on his adventure and being well aware of the natural fickleness of men, would not for anything in the world let it seem that she was trying to keep him, as she put it, "chained to her"—and this though she was already suffering agonies at the thought of his possible unfaithfulness. Eon was greatly touched. "Sweet lady," he sighed, "I swear to remain faithful to you." Then, having read and re-read his precious letter and kissed it a hundred times, he at last rejoined Douglas, who was both a little jealous and a little suspicious of this private correspondence, and they agreed that it was time for them to leave Mainz. They thought it prudent to do so in the night without leave-taking, in case they might be forcibly detained, and so it was that the Chancellor, Bahnspruck, in whose house they had been lodged by the Elector's command, found their beds empty in the morning. His wife and the good lady who controlled the household seemed strangely afflicted by the news and burst into heart-broken sobs.

Not long afterwards at the Three Kings at Erfurt, which is the best inn in that town, a great roar of laughter made the servants look up from their work. The host shrugged his shoulders and grumbled, "Oh well, the French are cheerful enough." But in the room next to that from which the laughter came a man banged his fist on the table at which he was sitting and rose hurriedly to his feet. "Lost," he said. "We have lost the game."

The woman facing him made as if to speak, but he put his finger to his lips.

"Be quiet," he ordered. Then he got up on the bed and pressed close to the wall. The woman joined him and each in turn applied first their eyes and then their ears to the two tiny holes which the man himself had bored in the partition during the night.

The man, a certain M. de Hautfort, was that person whom Eon had encountered three weeks before this in the anteroom of the Hotel du Conti, and who in his efforts to get rid of the Chevalier had succeeded only in exposing his poor friend

Beauvallon to a masterly piece of swordplay. The woman looked like a German. She was fair, rather ponderous and fleshy with fine but hard blue eyes and a magnificent complexion. After a minute or two of watching and listening Hautfort jumped down from the bed. "They are going out. I didn't hear properly what they were saying to one another."

He threw himself into an armchair and began to mutter in a low voice. The woman leaned over him and listened without saying anything.

"What can have happened at Mainz? God knows. It makes very little difference whether what she was telling her companion is true or not. We shall never know any more about it, especially as the servants are tight-lipped. They are French, both of them, and a sly pair by the look of them. It is obvious that the Elector let our friends slip through his fingers. Silly old idiot! Yet I had whetted his appetite well enough. A ravishing girl, I told him. Girl, indeed! A young man, rather, with all the airs of a girl, like the Abbé de Choisy once was, and that's what makes him so dangerous. Once the man had been discovered under the petticoats all Germany would have been in an uproar, not to speak of the fact that there would have been no difficulty then in having them searched. It would have been an insult to His Highness, if nothing else. But we were too late on the job, and they have got away."

"The weaker of the two," said the woman, biting off her words as she spoke, "is the tall fellow. One could trap him."

"You could trap him, Madame de Walberg, no doubt. I have thought of that. But not just yet. They are going to dawdle in Germany, dawdle endlessly . . . making out they are mineralogists. We have plenty of time—Prussia would do, or perhaps Poland. It doesn't matter, all we care about is preventing them from reaching Russia. Perhaps we have been in too much of a hurry. Wouldn't your Butkopf scheme work? It's a first-rate decoy and has gone well enough with others."

"Yes," said the woman. "Yes, it might. All we should have to do would be to let them know that there are some quarries of the greatest interest near Erfurt."

They looked at one another in silence.

"I must think it over," she said.

Suddenly Hautfort lifted his head a little and took the other by the arm.

"Look!" he said, "Here they come back again."

From the window they watched Eon's reappearance on Douglas' arm. All the men, tradesmen, gentlemen and officers, stared at him as he passed with the narrowed eyes and air of absorption which betrayed their masculine thoughts. He carried himself without the least sign of affectation. He was a woman to the fingertips and with a most attractive air of modesty.

"How well he plays his part as a woman!" said Hautfort. "And to think that he handles a sword like an angel and was within a hair's-breadth of sending my poor Beauvallon to join his fathers."

"I was only wondering . . ." began the Walberg when the other had passed through the door.

"You're not getting interested in him, by any chance? I see you find the little Chevalier attractive. Be careful you don't get the worst of the bargain. He has fooled greater people than you. . . ."

And when the woman, scarlet as a lobster, raised her voice to protest the purity of her intentions, he spoke roughly to her. "Be quiet! We are not concerned with pleasure. Our business is . . ."

"With death?"

"Nothing but. Let your great red-headed beast of a baroness have him. He is for her, not for you. Set the Butkopf trap for him."

She met his hard eyes squarely for a while. Then they both suddenly relaxed and smiled at each other like two fallen angels on the brink of Hell, with talk of murder on their lips and its image in their eyes.

In this year of 1755, Germany was still at peace. There was no disturbance, none of the feverish recruiting which presages war. Eon and Douglas only noticed some military movement and more than ordinary precautions in the neighbourhood of the fortresses in those small strips of territory between the Rhine and the Elbe which were subject to the King of Prussia.

In these places they thought it more prudent not to linger if they could possibly avoid it, but they were able to go all the way from Cologne into Saxony, even making a short excursion into Bohemia, and come back to Erfurt, without any inconvenience. As soon as Douglas heard of the existence of a quarry or a mine, he rushed off with his specimen-hammer in his hand and, after asking all sorts of questions of the engineers and workmen, came back with his pockets bulging with samples of ore. The ordinary folk saw no harm in this, nor for that matter did the many overlords, dukes, counts, margraves and barons through those territories they passed. Some of these overlords were so grand that it was said of them in the vaster courts that when his lordship's dog sat down his tail was sure to be in someone else's territory!

Eon, with his lively intelligence, had been quick to pick up an idea of mineralogy. He could quickly judge the age of a formation and the nature of rocks which it contained. He learned to distinguish at first sight all the important ores, and he developed a particular flair for finding seams of coal and metalliferous deposits. Douglas remarked that it would be well worth while for any Prince to employ him for this purpose just as certain dogs are used to hunt for truffles.

They had been some days at Erfurt, a pleasant little provincial town, like many others in Germany at that time, which prided itself on being the home of a number of artists and other distinguished people. The mere fact that they were French made them welcome in the best local society. Douglas would willingly have lingered there, but Eon, who was more energetic by nature, was in a fever of impatience at the sense of finding himself in the Electorate of Saxony, whose ruler at the time was also King of Poland. The Chevalier was already in his element, and just as he was proud of the astonishing way in which he had so far managed to dissemble his sex, he now began to feel a growing appetite for great adventure in the diplomatic field.

One day when they were out walking, Eon in his usual disguise, with Douglas as his escort, they were greeted by a tall and good-looking woman with red hair who was standing at the door of her coach. They went forward politely to meet her

and she begged them to do her the honour of getting into the carriage with her so that they could talk more easily together. There was a man sitting on the box in the attitude of a servant with his head uncovered, whom she presented as her manager, Dr. Kottbus. Herself she introduced as Baroness Butkopf, owner of a castle a few miles from the village in the midst of the Harz Forest. Knowing that the two visitors were interested in mines, she suggested that they might like to look at the abandoned workings on her property in the heart of the woods. She said that she would be delighted to entertain them at the castle afterwards. Douglas found her charming and attractive; he was partial to red-heads. Eon formed quite a different opinion; he thought she had a sinister air and took Dr. Kottbus to be a sly fellow. But, once again, love of adventure overruled his judgment. It was agreed that on the following day they should go as far as the village of Saint-Christopher, near Zella, and that the doctor would meet them at the entrance to the largest gallery, which was near the beginning of the village. The baroness made every apology for her inability to act in person as their guide, but said that she would place one of her two carriages at their disposal.

They thanked her profusely for the invitation. But when she left them, Eon, using the privilege of curiosity allowed by his disguise, looked behind him after her. He saw their new friend leaning out of the window of her coach and following them with her eyes with a ghoulis expression in them. He found himself remembering old legends of the Burgundian countryside, of women who turned into wolves and devoured the men who had been rash enough to follow them into lonely woods, and though by nature he was hard-headed and sceptical enough, he could not help confiding to Douglas, "I don't care for this business at all. That woman has something about her that makes me think of the Devil."

But Douglas only laughed and shrugged his shoulders pityingly. "You see the Devil in everything. Probably that is your French upbringing. This is simply a case of a pretty woman trying to get a little fun out of her lonely life."

Next day, towards noon, after having lunched in the inn at

Saint-Christopher, they repaired, hammer in hand, to the mouth of the workings. Here they found Dr. Kottbus waiting for them, seated on a lump of slaty rock. He got up as they approached and came to meet them. Eon was dressed as a man, wearing trousers.

"My niece," said Douglas, "has put on these clothes to allow herself more ease of movement."

Kottbus smiled wanly and bowed more deeply than ever to the Chevalier, who, on his side, sketched a curtsy like any well-bred young lady. Eon had never appeared more obviously feminine than he did in these clothes; the habit of wearing petticoats made itself felt in spite of the disguise. Before they left that morning he had insisted to Douglas that the two servants should follow them, but both Bragard and Heart's Delight were sleeping so heavily that it was impossible to wake them. At the suggestion of drunkenness, Eon shook his head.

"No; it's not that; these fellows don't smell of liquor. If you ask me, they have been drugged. We must take our swords and pistols."

Now, watching Kottbus light his lantern, Douglas felt quite happy. "A good fellow; a typical German man of affairs," he assured himself. But Eon, finding in the man's face no trace of anything but hypocrisy, and rascality, thought to himself, "We are trapped. This ruffian, who no doubt thinks that we are rich people, will lead us into some hiding-place where we shall be held until we are ransomed. What fools we were to accept an invitation from a woman about whom we knew nothing." He imagined that Conti and his friends, even the King himself, would repeat, when they heard the story, the words of Molière's Geronte: "*Mais qu'allaient-ils faire dans cette galère?*" And with these sombre thoughts in his mind he followed Douglas and Kottbus into the level, which was pitch dark except for the faint light of the lanterns.

A few hours later—Douglas's watch showed a quarter-past four—the two men found themselves alone in a part of the mine a long way away from where they had started. They were very tired, but the exploration had been interesting. It was an old iron mine with a remarkably complicated system of

galleries. It seemed as if work had been suddenly interrupted probably as the result of foreign or civil war and had never been resumed, for at various points they found rusted tools and even piles of what Douglas identified as human bones. But the deposit still seemed to be rich in ore and Douglas collected several samples which proved this. The Scot was genuinely absorbed by his enthusiasm for mineralogy and once he got into a quarry or a mine it was impossible to distract his attention. Even Eon had gradually forgotten his suspicions, and towards the end of the day he ceased to feel any anxiety, as they plunged deeper and deeper into the low passages, some of which seemed likely to fall in on them at any moment. Every now and then Kottbus struck off to the right or left, leaving one of the lanterns with them, but it was never long before they heard his footsteps once more and saw his huge shadow dancing in the flickering light as he went on ahead again. But, just after Douglas had noticed that it was four o'clock by his watch, the German failed to reappear after one of these divergences.

"Do you think he is lost?" asked Douglas after a few minutes. "Or has he had an accident of some kind?" He listened intently. "I don't hear his voice." He shouted two or three times himself, but only echo answered.

Eon frowned. "I am more inclined to think that he has given us the slip," he said.

"But why?" asked Douglas, anxiously. "What could be the point of that?"

They called out again but still there was no answer. Then, Douglas raised his lantern and said, "We had better go straight on. We shall find a way out quite soon."

They went directly ahead, as he suggested, following the gallery where Kottbus had left them. The candle in their lantern was burning ominously low, but there were no turnings to confuse them and they felt themselves gradually going uphill. After a considerable time, just as they were beginning to fear that their light would fail, they felt a breath of fresh air on their faces and a few yards further on emerged into a wood, just as night began to fall. They followed the first path to which they came; it seemed to be little used, but there were signs that



people came that way. A feeling of uneasiness kept them silent, but they comforted themselves with the thought that there were two of them and that they were both armed.

A barrier across the path was easily pushed aside and Eon and Douglas then found themselves on a cart-track between two walls overgrown with weeds. On either hand the place was in a state of desolation, but they were no longer in the forest; this seemed once to have been a park, untended for perhaps some fifty years. Suddenly, at a bend in the wall, as they skirted the moss-grown base of a statue which itself, covered with green fungus, was lying among the brambles, they saw in front of them a castle of considerable size. It had an air of ancient dignity, although cracks ran down its ivy-covered walls and its roof had tumbled in. The building was partly surrounded by a moat full of stagnant water. The two companions crossed the drawbridge in silence. At the far end of the bridge was an open door, through which they went. They were not greatly surprised when the drawbridge was raised behind them and the door shut, but were perturbed when they heard two bursts of laughter from beyond the moat.

The dark mass of the castle which loomed before them was relieved by only one small square of light. Silence enfolded the place; not even a dog barked. But they knew it could not be uninhabited. Firstly, the light proved that and, then, these unseen people who, as the two went on, raised bridges and shut doors. Now they saw that the inner doorway was opening. They went through, fingering the butts of their pistols, climbed a staircase which they found on their right, and, beyond another open door, at last came out into a sort of guardroom, where a man stood in the dim light holding six mastiffs on leash. He seemed surprised at the two strangers. He hesitated for a moment and gazed fixedly at Eon. Eon, more alert than Douglas, realized that the fellow was astonished to see two men when he had expected a man and a woman. He was indeed muttering in German: "But the woman? Where's the woman?"

Then he shouted a few words, and accompanied them in awkward mime. The two realized well enough that he meant "One at a time," but they were reluctant to separate.

"One at a time," urged the man again, and he took some dice from his pocket and threw them on the wooden table which stood in the middle of the guardroom. Douglas began to laugh. He threw the dice. "Twelve!"

Eon threw in turn and cried, "Ten! Curse it, you should let me go first. You will be disarmed."

Douglas saw the point, and hesitated for a moment. Then his face set. Instinct told him that behind the door he would see the tall red-headed woman of the day before. "The luck has decided," he said.

The man opened the door for him, bowed him in with a flourish and then, shutting the door, signed that Eon should follow him.

"Douglas is ridiculous," thought Eon, jealous without being willing to admit it. "How does he suppose I am going to spend the night?" But he followed the light which the man in front of him was carrying. They went up a staircase and on the floor above the man opened a door. Eon went in and suddenly found himself alone in a very large room, partly taken up by one of those beds which were made in the seventeenth century to hold at least four people. Dusty spiders' webs hung from the ceiling. The room was all in shadow except for the light of a candle stuck on a rickety table, which was covered by a torn cloth. As he took in all this Eon heard the door slammed behind him.

The curtains were of damask, centuries old and falling to pieces. The chairs were high-backed and hard. The floor was paved in black and white. The idea of sleeping there never crossed Eon's mind. He rushed to the windows; they looked out on trees which cut off further view. For an hour or so he pondered as to how he could get to Douglas, who, no doubt, was in serious danger. During this time the man with the dogs brought in his dinner and came back later to take the dishes away. After this all was silence, save for the hooting of owls outside the window. Eon made up his mind to reconnoitre. He checked the priming of his pistols, took his sword under his arm, put the small remaining stump of candle in his pocket and went out of the room. Passages, staircases, all seemed empty and echoed ominously. Here and there a stray beam of

moonlight filtered through a half-open window and made a path of light on the stone floor. The place seemed uninhabited. Eon counted up those he had to reckon with—the woman they had met in Erfurt, Kottbus, the man with the dogs. And there were the dogs themselves. He decided to take a look from outside, and got down through one of the ground-floor windows into the court. The little square of light which they had seen in the wall of the castle when they came in was still there. Eon expected to be attacked by the mastiffs, but there was no sign of movement anywhere. "Let us examine the field of battle carefully," he thought, scanning the lighted window. He had no doubt that Douglas was closeted behind it, probably with the big red-headed woman. And Kottbus possibly was mounting guard, with the other man and his dogs. But Eon was puzzled by the significance of "One at a time!" "The fellow has taken me for a man," he thought. "Shall I be summoned shortly or must I wait my turn until to-morrow night? Or, if Kottbus has told his mistress about my disguise, will she leave me to rot in my room? But, above all, is this no more than a way to satisfy the desires of a woman who looks like the Devil incarnate?" When he remembered the two bursts of laughter from the moat he could not help shivering. For a moment he toyed with the idea of going back to his room and trusting to Providence, but he had begun to be fascinated by the mystery of this old castle. Dr. Kottbus must be hiding somewhere in it, and so must the man with the dogs. He could not understand how such a formidable pack could be kept from giving tongue. He went back through the same window and resumed his exploration of the château. Suddenly he saw the light of a torch at the end of a passage and a woman appeared, evidently a servant; her hair was white and she walked along, with down-cast eyes, muttering to herself. Eon stepped aside and, as she went past without appearing to notice him, he touched her arm. She paused for a second and put her fingers to her lips, then she went on her way, still without looking at him. Eon followed her.

She came to a door and opened it. The night air blew in Eon's face as they went out. The woman extinguished her torch and set off at a slow and melancholy pace across the park.

The rides were nearly overgrown and every now and then she caught her dress in the brambles. At the end of a little sloping path they came to a clearing where there was a group of grassy mounds and a newly-dug grave in which a man was standing waist-deep, throwing out the last few spadefuls of earth. This man showed little interest at first in the approach of the woman, who halted close to him still muttering to herself. But when he saw someone behind her he interrupted his task and peered at Eon, leaning on his spade. His face, if not exactly that of a priest, was at any rate ecclesiastical, as is so often the case with grave-diggers, who are usually bellringers and beadles as well; it was a long, serious face, the face of an old man with a pointed chin and sunken cheeks over a toothless mouth. He spoke to Eon in German. Eon showed no sign of having heard him, nor did the woman, who was now holding her head between her hands and seemed to be praying. But all of a sudden Eon heard the sound of Latin words:

"Who art thou, my child?"

"A child does not have a sword," answered Eon in Latin.

"Who art thou, then, thou who hast a sword and yet wearest the semblance of a child?"

"I came here with a friend of mine," said Eon "and a serving-man in the castle said to us, 'One at a time.' Canst thou explain me this?"

"No," said the man, after pondering for a moment. "I cannot explain it. I have no orders save to dig a grave."

The last word fell like a knell on Eon's soul. He took a step forward and asked, "Dost thou tell me that this grave is for my friend?"

Without answering otherwise, the man pointed to the row of mounds. "It is the custom," he said. "They cannot bear the weight of her love."

Then he muttered: "Thou art young and thou hast rather the air of a girl. And I have not received orders to dig another grave. No; I have no such orders."

They heard a little noise, the noise of a twig snapping. The woman had turned her back on them and was going away. The man shrugged his shoulders:

"She is mad," he said, "and she is afraid of fire. She believes that she will die by fire."

Eon interrupted him. "Is the grave finished?" he asked.

"Yes," said the gravedigger. "It is waiting for its man."

"Or its woman," thought Eon. And without another word he turned back towards the castle. There was not a moment to spare. In a few minutes the gravedigger would be home in his hovel, and the woman Heaven knows where; the dogs' keeper was no doubt asleep with his charges beside him. The only thing to be done was to regain the castle and find the room where Douglas was. But, by the time Eon reached the door the woman had already gone inside and bolted it.

"That's that," said Eon to himself. "I'm shut out." He began to walk round the outside of the building; the same window still showed a light. He decided that the easiest way of getting back would be down a chimney. He noticed a lead drainpipe of the kind then usual, secured to the wall by iron bands. Eon was both strong and nimble, and he found it even easier than he had expected to climb up to a point whence he could scramble on to a part of the roof which was not too steep; there had been no recent rain and although the old roof was covered with moss it was not slippery. Eon thus reached the chimney which he had marked out from below and, after discarding the scabbard of his sword, which was getting in his way, he began to let himself down. It was one of those enormous, old-fashioned chimneys which they used to sweep by setting fire to them occasionally—they were so thick that this was the easiest way of getting rid of the soot.

There was no smell of smoke and Eon felt exactly as if he was in a dry well. It was easy enough to descend by resting his back against one side and his feet against the other, but, near the bottom he lost his foothold and fell the rest of the way. He was not hurt, but he made a fearful clatter and a great cloud of soot fell with him into the empty fireplace. He picked himself up, contrived to light his candle, and made his way to the door, which groaned on its hinges as he opened it. He had tied his boots round his waist and went along the passage in his stockinged feet more or less at random, in the general direction of

the room where he expected to find Douglas. He carried the lighted candle in one hand and his sword in the other. Suddenly he saw on his left a crack of light shining from under a door. "That's it," he thought. What was the next step? He might try to throw the door open suddenly, but it was probably bolted, and if he hammered on it or shouted Douglas' name it might lead to murder. While he was pondering over this he saw twin points of red light coming towards him. Obviously the eyes of an animal watching him in the darkness. Then he saw another pair, and yet another, and he could make out some low shapes in the shadows. Here were the dogs at last! Eon realized now that they had been purposely trained not to bark, but they were growling, and their growls became more threatening every moment. Their keeper must be near at hand, and Eon could have no hope of defending himself against him and the six dogs. He therefore beat a quick retreat, using his sword to fend off the beasts at his heels, who continuously growled but did not set upon him, and gained the room next to that down whose chimney he had tumbled. This room, the wood-store of the place, was piled up with logs and brushwood and the straw used for lighting fires. Eon seized two or three bundles of straw and, lighting them, hurled them, as they burst into flames, into the passage in front of him and threw open the window to create a strong draught. The dogs recoiled, throwing monstrous shadows in the flickering light of the flames. Just then, the man appeared, swearing, and behind him someone else whom Eon rightly guessed to be Kottbus. Eon fired two random shots, and the dogs' keeper fell, but Kottbus was untouched. The latter rushed to the door from under which Eon had seen the glimmer of light and began to hammer on it with his fists, shrieking explanations of which the Chevalier could not bother to make anything. As he leaned against the door, beating at it and screaming with terror, gasping and half-suffocated, Eon picked up and lighted bundle after bundle of straw and fed the tremendous blaze, which was driven by the draught towards the wretched man. The passage filled with smoke, Kottbus fell to the floor and the dogs fled.

It was then that the door opened and Eon glimpsed the woman through the cloud of smoke. She must have thought

there had been an accident and she banged the door to against the fierce heat of the fire. The next minute the door itself was in flames. Eon knew that those behind it could escape by the window and considered it time for him to look after himself. In fact, when he got back to his own room and leaned out of the window he saw Douglas and the lovely red-head below, knotting their sheets together to effect their escape. He himself found the drainpipe again and slid down it. The others were so occupied with themselves that they had not noticed him at all and, when all three had gained the ground, Eon concealed himself in the shadow of the building. Douglas, only half dressed, was swearing as usual, and Eon reflected that he had no idea that his friend had saved his life. The woman, whose red hair was loose on her shoulders, rushed at Douglas, seized him by the arm and began to drag him away. At the same time, she called out at the top of her voice, "Kottbus! . . . Hermann!"

"You're not the first woman," Eon grimly mused, "who has tried to wake the dead!"

Then she called, "Jupiter, Pluto, Uranus, Neptune, Mars, Mercury!"

"Those must be the dogs," thought Eon. "Well, they'll be just so much roast meat."

They were descending the slope, Douglas and the woman, who never stopped calling out, leading the way and Eon keeping his distance. In this way they came to the clearing. The grave-digger had stepped out of the grave, which was now finished, and was standing with one foot on his spade gazing at the fire. They could hear the roar of the flames and the croaking of the ravens who had left their nests under the roof and were circling in a black cloud above the burning castle. Eon chose this moment to step into full view, and pointing first to the open grave and then to Douglas he asked, "That was for him, wasn't it?"

The woman jumped aside in her surprise and the movement betrayed that she had a dagger hidden under her dress. Eon went on, with a laugh, "One at a time!"

It would be hard to say what ideas ran through the distraught woman's head. She may have thought that the little man there

before her was indeed the young woman from Erfurt come to rescue her lover. Or, perhaps, with the subtlety of feminine intuition prompted by Eon's soldierly bearing, she grasped the truth in this moment of crisis. Her face, seen by the light of the moon and the flames, seemed to collapse in mingled grief and fury. The castle had become a roaring furnace. Suddenly, out of it came a pitiful howling from the maddened dogs, which suddenly died away on a last shrill whine.

"The dogs must have stayed inside," said Douglas, and added, "How the devil did the place get on fire?"

"I set fire to it," said Eon, "to rescue you."

He slapped his chest and assumed a dramatic air of triumph. The woman snarled savagely.

At this moment the mad woman appeared on the roof, running backwards and forwards along the parapet, waving her arms and screaming. Suddenly her foot slipped on the mossy tiles. They thought that she would fall to the ground and be smashed to pieces at the bottom of the wall. But just then the roof fell in and an enormous sheet of flame rose into the air. The mad woman looked into the crater for a moment, then threw herself into it.

The whole scene was so overwhelming that the two friends had forgotten the red-head until, standing on the edge of the grave and looking at the inferno, they heard her mutter, "It's just as they told me. I shall lose everything by fire."

Eon did not understand the words, which were spoken in German, but he noticed the grimace on the woman's face, and saw her lift her arm. He jumped to one side and Douglas, warned by his movement, did the same. The wretched woman stifled a curse, and, turning the dagger against herself, drove it into her bosom. Then her knees gave way and she rolled on the ground. The two men bent over her at once. "A fine job," said Douglas.

The grave-digger had not moved. Once more Eon drew on his stock of Latin to give him an order, "Put her in the hole!"

The gravedigger nodded approvingly. He crossed his arms and gazed first at the new grave and then beyond it at the row



of murdered lovers already half lost in the night. He chuckled to himself and spoke in a low voice. And when Douglas showed surprise, Eon said, "He is playing the philosopher. Since your English Shakespeare wrote his *Hamlet*, all grave-diggers have taken to philosophizing."

## CHAPTER VIII

# Dalliance at Strelitz

TWO DAYS LATER Eon and Douglas were at the Palace of Mecklenburg-Strelitz. They had decided that the quicker they left Erfurt the better, for at any moment their presence at Butkopf on the night of the fire might become known. Eon had been impatient to press on to Danzig, but Douglas had urged that they should spend a week at Nouveau-Strelitz, the Grand Duke of which, a former friend of his, had recently died, leaving a widow and four daughters. To Eon's protests he had replied that it was very desirable for the Chevalier to have the experience of living as a woman among a court of sophisticated women of whom he had so far seen little enough, and over and above this he urged that the Grand Duchess was in a position to give them most useful help in their journey to St. Petersburg. Eon yielded to the argument, and here they were among the ducal family, with Heart's Delight again disguised as lady's maid.

From the moment they arrived, Sophie-Charlotte, the youngest of the four daughters, had conceived a passion for Eon, or rather for Léa de Beaumont, for this was once more the name under which the Chevalier had been presented. It was a case of love at first sight. Sophie-Charlotte was thoroughly bored at Strelitz, and like every good little German girl who is always hearing gossip about France and the French, she thought of Versailles and the Court of Louis XV as a charmed paradise where taste reigned over all the graces—a lovely place, but oh, so dangerous! To Sophie-Charlotte, more than all the others, the arrival of Douglas and his niece had brought a breath of paradisaical air.

She would have been very much surprised to hear that anyone in the village spoke of her except as a charming little person, the very model of an eligible princess. Yet two people in a certain inn discussed her every day in quite different terms,

albeit they spoke in cautious whispers. These two, like all the neighbourhood the day after the fire at Butkopf, had rushed headlong to the burnt-out castle to search among the debris. They had followed the trail of Eon and Douglas from Erfurt along the road to Nouveau-Strelitz. Now they were installed at the sign of the Golden Dial, about half a mile from the castle of Strelitz, whose towers they could see in the distance. The Walberg was in her own room while Hautfort was showing from his a great coarse, fat-cheeked Mecklenburg serving-wench, to whom he was protesting, "I swear it! I swear it!"

And then on the landing he pulled her to him, embraced her heartily and repeated, "I swear it!"

But, as soon as the door shut behind her, he gave a little whistle and the Walberg came in. "I have what we wanted," he said, and showed her a letter which the servant had given him. It still retained a lingering trace of perfume; it was the letter which the Chevalier had had from Mme de Rochefort while he was at Mainz. The pair read it, then looked at one another, smiling maliciously.

"What did I tell you, Mme de Walberg?"

"Obviously, she is his mistress."

"Maybe. I know Mme de Rochefort. She is refined and delicate—a dainty for a King!"

"Well, the letter makes everything plain enough."

"Let's not argue about it," broke in the other. "It doesn't matter whether she is his mistress or not. But it's clear that she loves him and he loves her. The miniature he wears round his neck can only be of her. Yet—what the servant you have just seen keeps on repeating over and over again—the little princess cannot live without her French friend. The thing is already a scandal."

"And so?"

"And so we may hope for this business to work out as we wish. Don't you see, Mme de Walberg, how dangerous the game is for him? Here you have an innocent girl and a young man dressed as a woman meeting every day in a lonely garden or a comfortable drawing-room. The girl is pretty and good-natured, the young man is a man of the world, trained in gallantry. It is true that he is held back by his great love for

another woman. But if his far-off mistress, Mme de Rochefort, should seem to him to be unfaithful or even cold and forgetful towards him, surely our Chevalier will fall into the depths of despair and think only of how to revenge himself. He would be more than human if he did not console himself with the little princess."

"In which case he would stay at Strelitz."

"He might even marry her . . . in left-handed fashion."

"Or her mother might have the seducer despatched by a sword-thrust."

Hautfort threw himself back in his chair. "In any case it means the end of the trip, the end of the mission and the end of Prince de Conti's schemes and hopes."

He pondered for some time. "We must draft a letter," he said at last, "and get it written. I can find the very man we want in Hamburg. I know an old clerk there who became a forger and escaped the galleys by the skin of his teeth. He has an astonishing gift for imitating other people's writing. All the local archives and the minutes of the law courts are full of examples of his skill. He shall write a letter in Mme de Rochefort's hand and we will seal it with a lead seal covered with this special quick-drying wax of mine, in which I can get an impression of the Countess's arms. Splendid. . . . I'll be off to-night."

"A farewell letter?" suggested Mme de Walberg.

"Don't be a fool," replied Hautfort. "It will be a cold letter—cynical and hard-hearted. That will be much worse."

She smiled humbly, "You're quite right." And as if to apologize for her foolishness, she added, "This letter has cost you a lot, Monsieur."

"Nonsense," said Hautfort, jumping to his feet. "Just a promise and a few kisses."

Eight days later Sophie-Charlotte rushed into her friend's bedroom, pushed "her" into an armchair and jumped on her knee.

"This is where I belong," she announced. "And this is where I mean to stay."

"How lovely for me," sighed Eon as he accepted the charming burden and put his arm round Sophie-Charlotte's waist.

He had just received the forged letter, purporting to come from Mme de Rochefort, which had been delivered to the Grand Duchess by a Dutch merchant who had gone away at once. It had come as a terrible shock to him. He could hardly believe these cold sentences to be really hers. She told him how she was going to dances and amusing herself, how the Duc de Nivernais was becoming more and more attentive. "I begin to wonder if he has fallen in love with me," she wrote. "You know all about him, my dear Chevalier. He is gallantry itself. . . ." She even dared to ask her dear Chevalier, her Cherub, if he thought she should go the whole way. And in return she offered him her advice. "I am sure that as you travel through Germany you will meet many women willing to be kind to you. Take love where you find it my dear Chevalier. After all we may be separated for years—perhaps even for ever." The letter ended with the most conventional expressions, such as she might have written to any chance admirer. "And that is the woman," said Eon to himself, "who swore by all her gods to be faithful to me." Then he shrugged his shoulders: "What a fool you are, my dear Chevalier, what a great ninny! She was only amusing herself for a little while at your expense!"

Smarting from his painful recollections, he turned to the little princess on his lap and while he went on chattering about dress designs, needlework, laces and all the rest of it and arguing about the current fashions and what was being worn at Versailles, he hugged the young body to him and thought, "What do these fools mean when they try to persuade me that I am not a man? I am one, I swear it. And this little girl doesn't realize it yet. How long can this nonsense go on? How long can I hide the fact that I only want to make her happy, and that if I am to do that she must leave my hands free? Ah! Mme de Rochefort, I wish you were here to see me. You would soon find out that you were by no means the only one with power to touch my heart!" And with a sudden gesture of rage he took the locket from his neck and threw it on the table.

Eon's night was spent in reverie. The reverie of a young man lapped in the soft ease of a castle in Mecklenburg by the side of a charming, fair-haired girl, telling himself that he might

lead this life for ever, and that it was indeed the only life worth living. As he lay stretched out in the darkness he imagined a life such as he had never thought of before—the life of a prince beside the pleasant waters of the Baltic. At one moment he was the young man in love dreaming of revels on the lake in the long summer nights. Then his fancy turned again to the soldier's life. The horses of Mecklenburg are famous; it would be easy to raise a regiment of cavalry—perhaps two, three or four regiments—in the Duchy. So love and glory blended into one, and every now and then as he dropped off to sleep the reverie became a dream in which all was exaggerated and distorted into strange imaginings until when he woke he did not know whether he had been dreaming or not.

Next morning, his mind was made up. Douglas had had the carriages got ready and, to explain their sudden departure, he had given Heart's Delight a letter to be delivered to him which was supposed to have come from a friend of his at the Russian Court. Eon pooh-poohed all this manœuvring. Douglas, when he saw him dressed as a man, swore that he was crazy, but Eon insisted that the Princess loved him, that she had guessed his secret and that he intended Douglas to go on alone while he carried off the Princess to the Court of Prussia.

Once there he was sure of asylum, and he even dreamed of coming back at the head of a Prussian army to seize the dukedom for himself.

Douglas shook his head. "I am afraid, my dear Eon, that if you persist in this madness you will find yourself leading a tame, a very tame, existence in a little castle hidden in a little park. You will soon be talking German with your charming little wife. She will be a Princess and you will be the husband of a Princess—that and no more. But the other sons-in-law—and there certainly will be others—will make short work of you and life here will become unbearable. If you go away you may become a captain—even a colonel perhaps—in the Prussian Army; I can picture you in the uniform. But you could have done that without leaving France. Every now and then you will come back to see your wife, for you can hardly expect her to share your barrack-room quarters. At fifteen your Princess is quite attractive; at twenty-five she will be fat, and when she

is annoyed with you she will remind you that she is Her Serene Highness and you nothing but a Chevalier. At thirty-five she won't be interested in anything but eating and her maids will have to put their knees in her back when they are lacing her up. She will be a stuffed German goose. As for the children—oh yes, you will have children all right—but what will they be? Princes? I wouldn't be sure. These little courts are very punctilious. No doubt they will be demi-princes in respect for their mother's blood. But you will never be anything, all your life, except a sneak-thief, a fox who has made his way into the princely hen-run. And suppose some day one of her sisters gets married to a king, and your Charlotte regrets her bargain, what then?"

There was a long silence, broken at last by a burst of laughter from the courtyard. Eon threw his hat across the room. "It's too late now," he said.

At half-past eleven that night Eon put on man's clothes again and armed himself. With his boots in his hand, he opened his door very quietly. The castle was wrapped in sleep. He opened one of the windows in the passage and imitated the cry of an owl, "Whoo! Whoo!"

From beyond the courtyard, near the granary, came the answering cry, "Whoo! Whoo!"

Heart's Delight and his faithful friend were waiting there with four horses. And Heart's Delight had also brought one of the lady's maids, to whom the secret of his disguise had been pleasantly revealed. Eon shut the window silently and began to climb the moonlit staircase. One of the stairs creaked under his feet and the noise sounded so terrific in the night that it seemed as if it must wake everybody. Eon felt his heart pounding, but all remained still.

On the first floor he had to pass the door of the Grand Duchess's bedroom. He stopped, almost against his will, to listen and it seemed to him that he could hear regular breathing, and even the suspicion of a snore. Next came the bedroom of the Palace Superintendent, the Baroness Bubna, and then those of the princesses. He counted these, one, two, three. The fourth was Charlotte's, and of this he had the key. He slipped it into the keyhole and it turned as a good key should. According

to their compact, the door was not bolted; it opened and shut again quietly enough.

Up to now everything had gone as well as could be expected. There had been no noise, and he wondered whether Charlotte was pretending or whether she was really asleep. It occurred to him that it would not be very respectable to arrive in Berlin with an unmarried girl, and that it might be best to make Charlotte his wife by the law of Nature, as the philosophers called it. Once that was done both the King and the mother must resign themselves to the situation. Just at that moment he bumped into a chair. Without more ado, he threw off his coat, laid his hat on it and put his boots on the floor. And still the little minx gave no sign. Eon took off his breeches. Then he stretched out his arms towards the bed, the position of which he knew, on the left of the window whose outline he could see in the moonlight in spite of the shutters. As he slipped into the bed he murmured, "My darling, my sweet, my love!"

There was a movement of retreat within the bed.

"Darling, are you trying to hide from me? Don't you want your Chevalier any more?"

Suddenly two arms, by no means thin, seized hold of him.

"Ah, sir! This is shameful."

It was the Grand Duchess. Eon recognized the serious voice which already threatened a coming storm. What—a gentleman who makes use of a disguise to seduce a princess! There was no time to be lost. In a couple of seconds Eon had regained the advantage, had laid low his antagonist and was saying, "Well, Madame, you can't say you didn't ask for it!"



## CHAPTER IX

# The Wolf Hunt

THE MORNING AFTER the unfortunate night when the Grand Duchess played the part of not too unwilling victim, Eon and Douglas had no choice but to take their leave with every expression of courtesy on both sides. Eon was loth to leave his Princess and resign his hopes of her, but he had to be content with compliments and sighs and with a letter introducing Mlle Léa de Beaumont to the lady in charge of the Imperial Household. The two went on to Danzig, Eon melancholy and Douglas full of self-importance, to their task of gathering information about the town and its citizens and even when possible about the Kingdom of Prussia and its designs.

They left Danzig one day at dawn, full of sad reflections. Prussia seemed to them an accursed country, casting an evil spell over its neighbours, but they had no great hope that the journey ahead would bring them to a country where honesty or kindness would flourish more; and as they rode through the long avenues of melancholy firs and birches across the great plain which stretches all the way from Danzig to St. Petersburg they thought of the joys of France and concluded that to live pleasantly is the greatest of God's gifts.

Their first halting-place was Elbing, in the heart of Prussia. Here Eon was woken up in the middle of the night by a tremendous noise of grinding wheels and tinkling bells. A little later, just as he was falling asleep again, he heard a low voice say quite clearly, "She is there."

"Are you sure of that?" This was a woman's voice, a deep contralto.

"Their carriage is in the shed," answered the man. "I've just seen it." And he went on, "She is charming. I am mad about her."

The voice was that of a Frenchman, without a trace of foreign accent. It was a voice Eon knew, but he could not

remember where he had heard it before. He slipped out of bed in the dark and tested the bolt on his door. A moment later he heard footsteps in the passage, going sometimes slowly and sometimes faster, backwards and forwards and pausing for an instant outside his door. Then there was a burst of feminine laughter outside Douglas's window, laughter of the rather vulgar kind which men find so disturbing. The laughter was repeated two or three times. The hook was being baited for the fish.

"Douglas can't possibly sleep through that," thought Eon; "and from what I know of him . . ." Sure enough a few seconds later he heard a noise in the next room as though Douglas had jumped out of bed. Then he heard the window creaking as the fool opened it. The laughter stopped and Eon guessed that a whispered conversation was going on, but after a minute or two there was another laugh and the woman said in an urgent voice, "Perhaps to-morrow. Now let me go!" and went away still laughing.

As Eon was getting back into bed he saw a piece of paper being pushed under the door. He picked it up, lit a candle and began to read. It was a well-written letter, in a tone of slightly exaggerated gallantry which was obviously not German. Could it perhaps be from some great nobleman from Lithuania, Sweden or Russia? But no, the language was certainly that of Paris or Versailles. The writer, it said, had heard of a pretty French lady who was passing through Elbing on the way to Russia. He himself was going to Lithuania, to hunt wolves at the invitation of his friend, Baron de Korff. A wonderful sport, wolf-hunting in those endless forests. He had been lucky enough to catch a glimpse of the young lady, and he dared to hope that he would be still more lucky and see her again in Lithuania. She must excuse him for not being more open in the matter, but he knew that she was closely watched, that she was in fact in the hands of a fearful tyrant.

"So," said Eon to himself, "someone thinks I am a woman." And he fell asleep dreaming of his charming Mme de Rochefort. Before the night was out he even imagined that he was holding her in his arms, and he awoke in a state of fury and began once more to curse the faithless creature who had betrayed him. Let

him only have a chance to see her once again in the flesh and he would tell her what he thought of her!

Almost as the sun rose, Eon was out in the courtyard. Heart's Delight and Bragard were busy with their luggage and the postilions were harnessing the horses. Douglas was standing with his fists clenched, glaring at the coach-house, which was now completely empty. Without thinking, Eon whispered in his ear, "You look terribly upset."

"I might well," answered Douglas; then he blushed and turned away muttering, "What I mean is . . ."

Eon laughed gently. "Don't make excuses, Chevalier. What you are trying to tell me is that the charmer to whom you talked last night and who made some rather vague promise for to-day is no longer here."

Douglas started violently. "How do you know all that?"

"Oh, you can hear everything here."

Douglas confessed then. "She is a German," he said. "Or perhaps a Livonian."

"Yes," said Eon drily. "Most intriguing, no doubt. But the man with her is French. And whether or not he is her lover I don't know; but here's what he left me . . . a *billet-doux*!"

Douglas put out his hand, but Eon withdrew the letter. "Oh no! Someone has fallen in love with your niece. Surely you aren't jealous?" and he burst out laughing.

The next stage was a long one, and they did not get to Koenigsburg until night. In this garrison town, where the streets were always full of troops, they could not find a lodging anywhere except in an out-of-the-way inn. Here, as Eon, lifting his skirts, picked his way across a rather foul courtyard in the fitful moonlight he saw through a window on the ground floor, an officer, or at any rate a man wearing a sword, standing as still as a tailor's dummy. Eon could not make out his face, but as soon as he passed him he heard a deep sigh. When the whole place was quiet he took the liberty of wandering along the passages and galleries, hoping to find out who the man was. When he retraversed the yard which he had crossed so recently, the window was shut. As he went back to his room he came across Douglas. "The woman I met yesterday is here," said Douglas between his teeth. "I heard her laugh."

"And so is the man, I believe," answered Eon in an equally low voice. "But it looks to me as if they didn't wish to meet us on Prussian territory." He added, biting his lip, "This is a French business, and I don't feel at all happy about it." Douglas made no comment until Eon went on, "We must . . ." when he interrupted in a tone of urgency, "We must not try to avoid them. At least we must find out who they are."

"Yes; and we must settle our account with them; and don't forget, Chevalier, that the account may go back as far as Mainz or Danzig, or at any rate to Butkopf. Anyhow," he went on jokingly, "I hope they aren't trying to get to St. Petersburg before us; if they do, you and I are very likely to end our lives in a cell next to that where your unfortunate predecessor, M. de Valcroissant, rotted to death."

Douglas sighed and made a vague gesture, like a man content to put up even with death, provided that he can satisfy his passion. "All he cares about," thought Eon, "is to find his woman again. Well, if we do find her we may rid ourselves once and for all of these threateners of our journey."

Next morning, when they asked the innkeeper about the other travellers, they heard that they had already left. And throughout the day, much as they tried to push on quickly, they were held back by wayside accidents. They at last got to Tilsit late in the evening and were just in time to see a ferry-boat crossing the Niemen, on the deck of which was a carriage and, standing by it, a strapping fellow with a woman beside him whose dress was trimmed with fur in the Lithuanian fashion.

"This is a put-up job," said Eon.

"You see intrigue in everything," curtly answered Douglas.

They were forced to spend the night in a wretched hut, for there was not another ferry until the morning. The worst part of it was that some sort of Prussian functionary, stiff-necked and tiresome, and none too clean, fussed round all night long, fiddling about with their luggage and keeping back their passports. Finally, he said that he was satisfied as far as they were concerned, but he refused to have anything to pass their servants.

"*Nein! Nein!*" was all he seemed to be able to say, and he

kept on saying it. They set themselves to make him drunk, but although he drank freely, he still said nothing but "*Nein!*"

Eon suggested forcible persuasion, but Douglas pointed out to him that the functionary had fifteen soldiers within call. And they were not too happy about the reports on their journey, which would probably soon reach Tilsit. The most important thing for them was to get across the river and out of Prussia as soon as possible.

"They are quite capable of looking after themselves," decided Douglas as he slipped his purse into the hand of Heart's Delight, under cover of saying goodbye to him.

"Ah, gentlemen," sighed Heart's Delight as he pocketed his travel-money. "You may be sure we shall do all we can to avoid the Prussian recruiting sergeants."

And Bragard added, "The Niemen is not so wide as all that."

When Eon and Douglas arrived by the ferry in Lithuania the two travellers, who up to now had kept so cleverly in the background, were waiting for them and introduced themselves as Mme de Walberg and the Vicomte de Hautfort.

"Perhaps they only want to make up a party of four," said Eon to himself, but then memory asserted itself. The woman no doubt was merely an adventuress picked up in passing through some little court where she might have been a female agent of His Most Christian Majesty. But the man suddenly fell into the picture. He was in the service of the Pompadour, one of those fellows of whom she employed so many, swash-buckler and spy, willing to do anything. He called himself the Vicomte de Hautfort. But, good Heavens, wasn't that the man he had met one day in the Prince de Conti's palace—the man who had egged on Beauvallon to insult Eon so that he had come to grief at Eon's hands before a crowd of happy trollops, at the end of a little lane behind the Temple. Yes, obviously, this was the wall-eyed gentleman. He had disguised himself now with a patch over one eye, but some day Eon would pull that off. Once he had satisfied himself on this point, Eon began to laugh. He realized the great advantage of knowing his enemy before that enemy was aware of recognition. All the same, he could no longer trust to his own disguise, for even if Hautfort, perplexed by appearances, was uncertain of Eon's

sex, he would know at least that the person with whom he was dealing was the swordsman who had wounded Beauvallon and, above all, that he was the intimate friend and confidant of the Prince de Conti. That being so, Eon reflected, it was not difficult to account for some of the adventures which had befallen them, particularly that at the castle in the Harz Forest. Clearly, even if no one else was concerned, this ruffian Hautfort had been following them ever since they left Paris. Many curious little incidents which he had noticed and then forgotten, like that of the carriage which followed them for a long time one night in Champagne without ever catching them up, or that of the mysterious Frenchman who left the Court of Mainz the day before they arrived, all came back into his mind and gave him food for thought.

Meanwhile, the Vicomte de Hautfort was pressing the suggestion that they should all go together to Kroje, where his friend Baron de Kroff lived, a few miles away.

"We can hunt wolves there," he said. "And is not that the very sport of kings? Has not the King of France his own pack of wolfhounds?"

If it had been left to Eon, he would have refused, in spite of his love of adventure and his wish to make certain of Hautfort's identity. But Douglas was eagerly expressing their warm acceptance of the invitation, and after all, Eon thought, this might be the better way. They could not go on with a spy always at their heels, and in the solitudes of Lithuania it might be possible to deal with him. Thus, he curtsied, "As you wish, Monsieur," he said.

In due course they came to the castle of Kroje, which stands some seventy miles from Tilsit, in Lithuanian territory, on a high plateau surrounded by lakes, and a little aside from the direct road from Prussia to St. Petersburg. In the ordinary way Eon and Douglas would have passed it on their left. The curious manner by which they had reached it suggested to them next morning that they might have been decoyed there—and with the worst intentions—but Douglas was too obviously intrigued by Mme de Walberg to be alarmed. Eon, on the other hand, was much perturbed, and he might have allowed his forehead to be puckered by a worried frown if he had not been

so intent on preserving his disguise before the searching gaze from Hautfort's single eye.

They were getting ready in the morning to face their host. "Come along," said Eon, but it was not gaily said, as by a man anticipating pleasure, but rather in the way a man would speak who was preparing to face danger. And when Douglas answered, it was in much the same tone.

Once more Eon had contrived in his disguise to maintain the appearance of a young woman in male attire. Something in the graceful fall of his cravat helped the impression as did the mass of pretty fair hair which lay lightly on his shoulders, loosely tied with black ribbon at the nape of his neck. As a final suggestion of sex, he wore a patch on one cheekbone.

In the great hall, the master of the castle, an old Lithuanian nobleman with a beard, was sitting in a large armchair with his elbow on a table on which stood several carafes of vodka, his legs wrapped in heavy bearskin rugs and stretched out towards a blazing log fire. "Vodka?" he asked, and the brief question ended in a silly sort of laugh. The old man seemed to be a little weak in the head. He muttered away to himself, rattled his sword and laughed for no reason. The other two people in the hall were the Vicomte de Hautfort and Mme de Walberg. The Vicomte was wearing a black wig which did not go at all well with his florid complexion, and he had a patch over one eye.

While the old man kept muttering, "Vodka?" Mme de Walberg gestured admiringly towards Eon. "How lovely she is," she said. "What an adorable creature!"

Hautfort bowed to Eon and, offering his hand in the most courtly manner, led him to an armchair. Meanwhile, the old man, as no one answered him, poured himself out a full glass of spirits, swallowed it, smacked his lips and gave vent to a few sentences in Polish which seemed to be of a humorous nature. Then he relapsed into his idiotic laughter, showing a mouthful of rotten teeth like those of a foundered horse. Mme de Walberg, sitting with her feet stretched out to the fire, was wearing boots like Eon, but she had on a short dress of the kind worn by women in Lithuania. Hautfort had gone back to the position where he was when Eon and Douglas came in, standing with his back to the fire. He was a tall man with a

skull-like head and a guarded smile. The expression on the fellow's bold and cunning face gave Eon the feeling that he was sniffing blood.

While Eon was taking stock of Hautfort, he listened to Mme de Walberg engaged in translating the rambling talk of their noble host. He was maundering about wolf-hunting and, after explaining that his health and the weakness of his legs no longer allowed him to take part in the sport, he assured his visitors that his dogs and his two men-servants were entirely at their disposal. As for himself, he would stay where he was and drink until they came back. A deep sigh as he said this was interrupted by his inane laugh.

"There is no doubt," said Hautfort, "that Mlle de Beaumont has never been prettier than she is in this disguise. Is she used to wearing it, I wonder?"

Eon took the point. He answered demurely that he was, by his uncle's permission (here he curtsied to Douglas, who bowed his acknowledgement), that he admired Mme de Walberg for having the courage to go wolf-hunting riding side-saddle. Compliments flew back and forth like shuttlecocks. The elegance of Paris, if not of Versailles, seemed to be in the atmosphere. "Just think that it was in Paris that I first saw that ugly face," thought Eon, "and now I have to come across it again on my travels. But I will blot it out somehow." He gave no sign of his thoughts, however, while the old man, raising his glass to each of them in turn, gulped down another toast each time he caught the eye of one of them and laughed away at God knows what under his bearskin cap.

They were galloping through the forest, Eon leading with Hautfort at his side and the other two behind them. A dozen hounds were following the trail, hackles up, with the excited air of a well-trained pack when the scent is hot. Behind them were the two servants.

"A fine pack," said Eon.

"The old fellow was telling me," answered Hautfort, "that half his hounds are bitches, for he has found that when the dogs come across a she-wolf, they hold off, whereas the bitches . . ."

Eon laughed, "Women are always more cruel than men."



"That is so, Madame, isn't it?"

Without meaning to do so, he emphasized the "Madame." "He hasn't got himself altogether under control," thought Eon. "For it seems to me impossible to suppose he did that to let me see he did not believe I was a woman."

Behind them Douglas and the woman had slackened speed, but Eon had every intention of being in at the kill. Hautfort went on, "Wolf-hunting is the best sport I know."

"Yes," said Eon. "One is at least certain that there is a wild beast in front of one." As he said this he kept his eyes away from Hautfort for fear of laughing in his face. They were galloping through what seemed to be an endless forest, made up almost entirely of birches, with here and there the dark triangular shape of a fir-tree. In the autumn weather the birches had taken on a light golden tint, and Eon was fascinated by their contrast with the dark-green hue set against a background of white trunks. There were no roads, but one glade led into another. Occasionally they skirted a pond and the noise of the horses' hoofs ceased as they galloped through the thick grass.

The two animals they were hunting were a well-grown wolf and a vigorous she-wolf who had probably only had one or two litters. Now her cubs were grown up, she had found another mate, quite recently. It was her mate who took the lead, and she followed close behind him. They were such as are classed by huntsmen as young wolves, for though they were well-grown and active they had not the experience or the powers of endurance of the old ones. The hounds were already close at their heels, and although the wolves never turned their heads one could see their hackles bristling. Every now and then one of the hounds snapped at their haunches, and then they forced themselves to go a little faster, holding their heads down and looking desperately out of the corners of their eyes. Eon, like most of his friends, had taken part in this sport before, and he judged at once that the male wolf was not up to the quality of his mate; it was only about eighteen months old and could not make up its mind whether to run or to fight. "As soon as a hound bites, it will turn on it," thought Eon.

"An old wolf," volunteered Hautfort, "will sometimes give

you a run of forty miles or more. Then the hounds will give up and lie down, and so do the horses for that matter. Are you tired?"

"We will discuss that to-morrow," said Eon, gritting his teeth.

The female had taken the lead, when they came to a large sheet of water which partly blocked the path they were following. The she-wolf got through the gap neatly enough, but her mate, crowded towards the water's edge by the leading hound, only got past with an effort, and then he found a large oak tree right in his path. He gave a plaintive little moan, and they saw the female shiver at the sound. Then she stopped and turned in her tracks.

"The power of love," said Hautfort, laughing.

The two animals had their backs to the tree and the hounds formed a wide semi-circle round them. From time to time one of them would start forward as if to attack, but the two formidable sets of teeth gave them pause. Finally, one took the risk; the she-wolf, avoiding the throat of the hound, which was protected by a spiked iron collar, seized instead its leg close to the shoulder and bit it. They could hear the bone crack. Another hound fell back at the same time with its ear torn off by the male wolf. After this the circle grew wider.

Hautfort jumped from his horse and drew his knife. A huntsman stood beside him with a hunting spear to keep one of the beasts at bay while Hautfort dealt with the other. The hounds closed in again and, when the huntsmen shouted them on, leapt into the fray. Hautfort followed them and, seizing his opportunity when the male wolf had its teeth in the muzzle of one of the hounds, plunged his knife into it just at the base of the shoulder. "That settles his account," he said as he rose to his feet.

His hands were covered with blood. The hounds swarmed over the dead animal, but the she-wolf was still violently shaking off her attackers, although they had their teeth in her belly, in her haunches and in her throat. Hautfort turned towards Eon, who was sitting motionless in his saddle with rather a pale face. "Shall I kill the female too?"

Eon felt a shiver go through him. "He is thinking of me,"

he said to himself as Hautfort chuckled to himself with the bloody knife in his hand.

"Why not?" answered Eon. "She seems to have the heart of a male."

The man bent down and struck, and everything was over except the cracking of the huntsmen's whips as they drove off the pack; then when they had cleared the space they split open the carcasses and threw the entrails to the hounds, who were soon reeking with blood.

The two huntsmen loaded the carcasses on to their horses' cruppers and Eon and Hautfort rode back without a word spoken.

The meal that night was a silent one. The old gentleman sat at the head of the table in a high chair. Behind him with their arms crossed stood the two men, with watchful eyes on his glass. Two women servants came and went with the food. The old man spoke very little, and when he did he spoke about the woods, the hunts and the wolves or told bits of meaningless stories. The Walberg translated a sentence here and there, but usually she merely laughed and said insolently, "Don't pay any attention to him." Meanwhile, Douglas was paying court to her while Eon listened to Hautfort, who was trying to draw him out on the subject of the French Court at Versailles, of which he said he knew practically nothing except that he had been taken there to meet some relations. The Chevalier was silently weighing up the two men-servants and guessing at their physical strength. They had cunning little eyes and ox-like shoulders. Towards the end of the meal, when a good deal had been drunk, one of the women servants spoke to her master, but the old man did not seem to understand. Mme de Walberg shrugged her shoulders. "There are two beggars here," she said, "probably Jews or Germans on their way to the Riga fair, asking for something to eat."

The old man banged on the table with his fist and shouted.

"That's all right," said Walberg. "He is going to give them food and drink," and, turning to the French visitors, she added, "Isn't he a wonderful old man? One can do anything one likes with him."

"I quite see that," thought Eon. "In other words, the house

is really theirs and to-night we shall have three men and a woman to cope with. But I wonder who these new guests are."

Now Hautfort broke in. "Do you know, Mademoiselle, what I have done with our two wolves? I have had them skinned; the skins are a present for you and your uncle and the flesh is being thrown under our windows. What do you think of that?"

"But why under our windows?" asked Eon.

Hautfort came close to him and showed his teeth in a crooked smile. Eon did not give way by an inch, but he half expected to see the fangs of a wolf reveal themselves under the man's lip, and at the same time he noticed how much this man's little eyes, cruel and unsmiling, resembled those of a wolf.

"That is to give notice to the dead beasts' comrades," said Hautfort. "There are hundreds of them in the woods round Kroje. It is a wonderful sight when they collect in their packs at the foot of the wall. Their eyes shine; they throw themselves on the meat and gorge themselves greedily, growling savagely. When they have finished eating, they sit there and howl for hours on end, and as there are twenty, thirty, fifty of them at a time the dogs shrink back against the walls of their kennels, so petrified with fear that their voices are stifled and they cannot even bark."

He paused for a moment, and then added, "Suppose anyone were to fall out of a window!"

There was a general laugh and healths were drunk all round. Douglas was drinking heavily, but Eon noticed that Hautfort, on two or three occasions, threw the contents of his glass under the table. "Trouble is coming to-night," he said to himself. Although he had drunk very little, Eon felt his head swimming and wondered whether this was due to exhaustion or anxiety. He knew that he had to depend entirely on himself, for Douglas was being helped upstairs by one of the men-servants, stumbling over every step. He opened the window, and there were the wolves. Their red eyes were like stars in the darkness, and he could almost feel a great sigh of greed rising in his direction. He himself sighed, for he felt that he was lost indeed, and that the fight that night would be his last. There was a good fire burning in the room, but he noticed that there was no bolt on the door, nor was there any table to push against it,

and the bed was too heavy to move. So he left his candle burning and sat down in his chair, facing the door, with his sword and pistols on his knees.

He woke up with a horrible feeling of being crushed to death. His chair was tottering and four men were throwing all their weight on him. The only light in the room came from the moon and the last embers of the fire. He made a vain effort to struggle free, but the others were too heavy to give him any chance of this. No one spoke and he did not make the useless attempt to shout for help in this forsaken castle. He wondered who the four men could be. Obviously two of them were the old gentleman's servants. But what about the other two? When he turned his head he saw Hautfort and the Walberg. Hautfort was standing upright and motionless. He had taken off his patch, and Eon recognized the wall eyes. The woman, much more at her ease, began to laugh.

"He hasn't undressed," said Hautfort under his breath. "What a pity!"

Eon closed his eyes. He realized that Douglas and he had fallen into the trap like two children. He wondered again who the two other men could be and then it occurred to him that they must be the two who had come begging for food. There was some dark object in the middle of the room, the nature of which Eon could not make out clearly; it looked like some kind of rug, shaped something like an animal. His hands had been tied across his chest and now they were lifting him up and laying him on this bundle. Suddenly the smell of it caught him by the throat, and his whole body shrank back in an effort to avoid the contact. It was a wolf's skin, still bloody, and they wrapped him in it and tied him up so that only his face was showing.

"What about the other?" asked Hautfort.

"He is tied up already," answered the woman, "but he is still snoring. He will never know what happened to him."

At that moment one of the four men pinched Eon violently.

"Swine!" groaned the Chevalier.

The man sighed and, still maintaining the air of a brutal gaoler, he pinched even harder. This time the Chevalier cried out, but as he did so, an idea flashed across his mind. It was a

fantastic notion, indeed, but it suddenly brought back some hope of life to which a second before he had bidden farewell. From that moment on he kept wide-open eyes on every movement of the four servants, though his mouth remained firmly closed. Meanwhile, Hautfort leaned over him. "Chevalier," he said, "the wolves are down there!"

Eon made no answer.

"And you will have no sword, Chevalier. Should we tell the story to the Prince de Conti? One person who will have a good laugh will be Beauvallon when I tell him how you screamed as you were torn to pieces. For you will scream, Chevalier."

Eon still kept silent.

"Don't you hear me? I wonder how I ought to address you to make myself understood? Chevalier or Chevalière? Anyhow the wolves will know. When they have ripped off your breeches they will find out and tell us the answer."

Someone threw a bundle down beside Eon. It groaned mournfully; it was Douglas.

"Throw them out," said Hautfort, and leaning out of the window he called, "Coming, coming, my beauties."

The two men had picked up the skin and were carrying Eon to the window when the Walberg laid her hand on Hautfort's arm. She pointed to the two beggars and suggested that useful as they had been up to that point they had now seen quite enough. Hautfort nodded and called out to them, "Thank you my good fellows. Here's something for you."

With a grand gesture he threw them his purse. One of them caught it in the air. The Walberg translated his words into German. The two rascals seemed to understand, for they bowed their thanks. But suddenly, as they passed between the two Poles on their way towards the door, there was a double flash of steel. The two Poles, with their throats cut, rolled on the floor, where they lay bleeding to death. Then the two men threw themselves on Hautfort and bore him to the ground, where one held him down while the other knocked down the Walberg with his fist and then lent over Eon, cut the bonds by which he was secured and freed him from the wolf's skin.

"Courage, Monsieur le Chevalier," he said.

"Thank you, Heart's Delight," cried Eon, leaping to his feet.

Already Heart's Delight had disarmed Hautfort, whom Bragard was holding down by main force, and he had backed the Walberg into a corner of the room. The position was reversed.

"Tie the man up," ordered Eon.

A moment later Hautfort was bound and wrapped up in the wolf's skin, except for his head. Then they freed Douglas and kicked him along the floor into a corner of the room, and took hold of the woman. She began to scream, but her screams were drowned by the impatient howls of the wolves outside, and she in her turn was tied up in the wolf's skin from which Douglas had just been freed.

Hautfort made no sound, the Walberg sobbed aloud and the two servants made an end of dying.

Eon went up to Hautfort. "So it was you who was spying on the Prince de Conti?"

The man did not answer.

"And it was you," went on Eon, "who tried to get me killed by one of your men in the precincts of the Temple and who ran away like a coward when you saw him wounded?"

Still no answer.

"Very well, there is no need for you to talk. You have confessed already. But you might tell me who employed you to spy on the Prince. Whose man are you, fellow?"

It was his turn now to kick the other in the ribs with his boot.

"Come on, you dirty spy, answer before the wolves eat you. Whose man are you?"

Walberg's voice came feebly from the other carcass.

"The Marquise . . ."

"I knew it," said Eon. "And you have taken other money too; English and Russian, I expect. Well, when I see the Marquise again in Paris I will tell her the story. She is very fond of hunting tales, and so," he added, laughing, "is His Majesty himself."

Then he went to the window. "Coming, coming, my beauties," he cried—and to the men he added, "Throw him out."

Bragard and Heart's Delight picked up the bundle. Hautfort now was struggling desperately with his mouth open and foam on his lips. He uttered no articulate word, but only a long

scream like an animal. Then suddenly the bundle disappeared and was swallowed up in the darkness. They heard a fearful howl, which seemed to shake the castle walls. It lasted a few seconds and then there was silence except for the crunching of teeth on bones and the half-stifled growling of the beasts below.

Eon turned then to La Walberg, while the two servants stood at his elbow, ready for whatever might happen. "I am told," he said, "that dogs show mercy to she-wolves. I should be sorry to take the risk of finding that wolves show mercy to bitches."

He glanced at the dead bodies on the floor, and then turned to the men with a laugh, "Look here," he said. "You can give the wolves that meat—you are very handy with your knives, my friends—and as for our Scottish friend and this trollop here, you can push them naked into bed together, the wolf and his mate, one drunk and the other terrified. Get on with it. And tuck them in well."

Then he leaned out of the window again and remarked, "Good Heavens, there's practically nothing left already. By God, the wolves in Lithuania have splendid appetites!"



## CHAPTER X

# The Wonders of the Peterhof

“YOU ARE DREAMING, Mademoiselle?”

The words were spoken in the slightly shaky voice of an old man. Léa de Beaumont turned to him.

“How could one help dreaming in such an enchanting setting?”

Eon was at the Castle of Peterhof, which stood on rising ground with a fine view of St. Petersburg, Kronstadt and the sea. Round him stretched gardens in the French style, full of fountains and waterfalls, with here and there statues in marble or bronze. There was a constant procession of officers and pages. Over the palace roof lay a milk-white dome of cloud. The aged Vice-Chancellor, Count Michael Voronzov, an amiable and courteous man, was paying his respects to Mlle de Beaumont.

“I must do the honours of the place for you,” he said. “There, in the distance, Mademoiselle, you will see in the lower garden two pleasure-houses, as we call them. The nearer one is called Marly; it was built by Peter the Great. The other, Monplaisir, we owe to the Empress Elizabeth.”

The scene spread out before Eon’s eyes was in some degree a copy of Versailles, but on a bigger scale, and therefore less intimate; more imposing, but less perfect in detail. Yet, though a copy, it had a nobility of its own, and Eon found the right words to say so. He was alone at Peterhof after a brief visit to St. Petersburg where he had left Douglas in violent argument with the English Ambassador. That worthy enjoyed an extraordinary privilege at the court, for it had been agreed that no Englishman should be allowed to stay in Russia if he was not *persona grata* at the Embassy.

Although Eon had only spent a very short time in the capital, he could not forget the fascination of the city, with its

great gloomy palaces surrounded by astonishing expanses of water—black water in the canals with the sheen of steel, in the Neva—all lying under a sky which seemed to be made of mother-of-pearl. He was most anxious to see it again, but for the moment the Court was at Peterhof, and the Chevalier's fortunes at Court offered brilliant prospects, since Charlotte de Mecklenburg's letter to her dear friend, Nadedja Stein, seconded by the good will of Voronzov, had led to the appointment of Mlle de Beaumont as one of the Empress's Maids of Honour. "Oh, if only Mme de Rochefort could see me here," he thought. "I can imagine her laughing and perhaps saying with a sigh, 'What is he doing, putting his head into the bear's mouth?' But she would have to admit that if I succeed here it will be an unprecedented masterstroke of diplomacy."

"M. le Comte," he said, "how can I ever show my gratitude for Her Majesty's kindness. To live near her, in this perfect place . . . I am overwhelmed."

Voronzov gave a little shrug. He was a good-natured man, to whom compliments came naturally. "Well," he said, "in the case of a French lady, it is the least one can do. How could we refuse to welcome beauty itself?"

Eon was perfectly sincere in his enthusiasms. Certainly the first night he had entered the palace he had had the feeling that he was walking a tight-rope. The worst part of it had been the ordeal of standing up to the searching examination by his new companions. When he found himself surrounded by the whole mob of these "Misses," daughters of the great noble families, he gave himself up for lost, especially as they all set to work at once to finger his dress and examine his ribbons, his lace, his head-dress, his shoes and stockings, in every detail. But Eon knew that neither his hands nor arms, his features, his complexion nor his hair would give him away. Nor even his voice. And during the long journey he had become so accustomed to his petticoats that sometimes he felt he had worn them always. He was quite sure that there was no detail wrong in his appearance, so long as he had at least a chemise to cover him. And he had no objection to anyone putting their arms round his waist, for, as we know, it could be spanned by two hands. The only criticisms he had expected and in fact had

overheard were about the flatness of his back and his lack of bosom.

But there are plenty of girls with flat backs and, as for the bosom, Eon had let it be known that at Versailles breasts like those of laundresses were not admired. After which, one of the sharpest-tongued of the young ladies, seizing a chance to attract notice, had snapped at her neighbour, a big and rather flabby girl, "Oh, you, with your udders—anybody would think you were a cow!"—which sally was greeted with hearty laughter.

In any case, the way Eon held himself, his graceful manners, his way of making an entry, his easy greeting to the others—all these things were taken as obvious signs of a Court lady. After a few hours in the palace, he was not only accepted without any shadow of doubt, but he found himself in a position to set the tone for the others. But when night fell he had had a shock. He had taken it for granted that each of the Misses had her own room and her own bed. But it was not so; each room had a double bed in it, in which two young ladies slept together, and Léa de Beaumont had been assigned to share a room with the young Princess Daschkoff.

Luckily, the Princess was a gentle, timid, fair-haired girl who blushed at anything and everything, and Léa took charge of matters at once, helping her friend to undress and tucking her up in bed; then she herself retired behind the screen, from which she emerged in a ravishing nightgown, covered with bows of ribbon, in the true style of Versailles. She jumped rapidly into bed, but took care to keep to her own side of it, and, saying "Good night" with a hurried kiss she blew out the candle and turned her back on the other, who was much too shy to risk putting a hand on her.

But Eon's night had not been a happy one. At first, as he lay with his back to the Princess, he wondered whether he should turn to face her. With his body rigid as a strung bow, he decided that she would not dare to struggle against him and that they would have a wonderful night together; but then he thought of the shock, the astonishment, perhaps even the tears, which he would have to overcome, not to speak of the possibility that the little fool might tell the secret to someone

the next day. No, he must control himself and be content to caress the delicate contours of the young body without risking anything more. But he saw that he must establish his domination and must impose himself as leader in the way that the boldest and more masculine in a company of girls is accustomed to do—behaving like a substitute for a husband and making herself obeyed in everything. It was, of course, essential that the young Princess should surrender herself entirely to this new friendship, and fortunately she would seem to want nothing better.

When at last Eon heard from her breathing that she was asleep and turned cautiously round, he was terrified at the thought of losing control of himself in his sleep and perhaps waking up to find his companion in his arms. He did in fact have a wonderful dream in which he made love to her at his leisure in the warm comfort of a huge, emblazoned bed with twenty chamberlains looking on. They both had crowns on their heads and the Empress of Russia was there herself, dressed as a dragoon and crying, "Time to get up, my friend!" But actually this warning came from the little Princess, whose charming face was leaning over his, and who gave him a kiss which started on the cheek and finished on the mouth. Her confusion made her more attractive than ever.

"Oh, my dear," said Count Voronzov, from whom nothing was hidden. "Young Princess Daschkoff is an angel. I am so glad you are sharing her room and her bed."

"And I, my dear Count, am delighted to do so."

There was no hint of irony in Eon's manner. But all the same Voronzov looked searchingly at him. This Mlle de Beaumont, for so the Count still believed him to be, had not, like most of the women he met in his daily life at the Court, soft, tender and languishing eyes. On the contrary, there was more than a hint of strength and self-assurance in them. She was very calm as she glanced round as if to complete her admiring survey of the view. Then suddenly, having made sure that they were alone and too far from any building or statue to be spied upon, the Chevalier whispered, "Can I speak frankly to you, M. le Comte?"

"Certainly you can," answered the Russian in some surprise.

"Where and when can I hand you the despatches from my King?"

He shot the words at the other quite unexpectedly in the most natural way. A nerve twitched in the Count's face, giving almost the effect of a grimace.

"A woman! . . ." he muttered.

Then recovering himself he went on in an almost normal voice, "Since you are a friend of the Grand Duchess Charlotte of Mecklenburg, Madame, it will be my pleasure to present you, at such times as your duties allow it, to several people who will be glad to hear news of her from you. I will call for you in my carriage. An old man like me may be permitted to carry you off with him, and in the carriage you can tell me what you wish, and if you have anything to show me . . . or to give me . . . we shall be undisturbed."

He gave a little sardonic laugh. "Well, well, I never saw such a thing before!"

"May I venture to suggest, M. le Comte, that there are still more surprises in store for you?"

The Count's first instinct was to snub this impudent young woman. Then he decided to take the whole thing as a joke. "Oh, well," he said, "in political life, one never knows . . ."

It was Eon's second night at Peterhof. He had not seen Count Voronzov again, and he had only a distant glimpse of the Empress on her throne at the concert on the previous evening, and he was worried about his papers and his *Esprit des Lois* in this castle where crowds of people seemed to come in and out as if it were a baker's shop. He was just going to bed by himself, for the Princess was on duty, when there was a knock at the door.

"Count Voronzov has sent for you, Madame."

At last! It was a fine night, and without a moment's hesitation Eon picked up his Montesquieu and followed the messenger. He was surprised and rather disturbed not to find Voronzov in the waiting carriage, but he allowed himself to be carried off for some distance, and finally they arrived at what appeared to be an empty house. As they came up to the door, the shape of a man appeared suddenly, running at full speed.

Lights went on and Eon entered cautiously. In a large, bare room he found two men with their backs to him bending over a shape in the corner. As he entered, one of them straightened up and faced him:

"Heart's Delight, Madame!"

Eon began to laugh, "And Bragard too, of course."

"And Bragard, too," said the Provençal in his singsong voice. Heart's Delight shook his head, "Madame, for the second time we have arrived at the right moment. The male ruffian has got away, but we still have the female. They were waiting to kill you. Next time I think you will really lose your life."

In the corner of the room Eon saw a trembling woman. He went up and stared at her.

"Madame de Walberg," he said. "Twice is too much."

In the silence that followed they heard the noise of carriages driving up, and a moment later Voronzov burst into the room, completely out of breath. For a moment he looked horrified, but when he saw Bragard and Heart's Delight standing respectfully against the wall, he began to laugh. Then he went up to Eon and took his hand between both of his:

"These are the risks of the profession, you know," he said. "You haven't come to any harm, have you?" Then, glancing at La Walberg, he added, "There is a convoy starting for Siberia to-morrow, curiously enough. This woman can go with it, and that will be the end of that. It will be what I think you call a 'good riddance'."

He made a sign to one of the men who had come with him, and Mme de Walberg was dragged away, screaming. The two Frenchmen withdrew at the same time.

"They have been in my service since yesterday," explained Voronzov. "How did they get here? With your luggage? No? Well, they must have followed your trail. The French are a knowing lot. However, they got here, they came to me and I took them on at once. I need clever and nimble fellows round me, and these two are brave as well. And besides, I can talk French to them, as I like to do."

He hesitated and then went on: "You are likely to need them. Have you heard about Douglas? No? The news is bad. The English Ambassador refuses to let him stay in Russia . . .

naturally, enough, since he is a Jacobite. So you will not see him again."

He looked quizzically at Eon, "You don't seem to be very much worried. All the better. You think you can get along without him?" He nodded his head. "I am not much surprised. You are the one who has the papers, aren't you? Wonderful people, the French! Will you show me what you have, Madame?"

"That's not quite so easy," answered Eon. "First of all, I must take off my dress." Voronzov smiled. It was not the first time he had helped to take off a woman's dress. When this was done and Eon stood in his stays and petticoat, he said:

"There it is—inside my stays."

"But, Madame!"

The Chevalier burst out laughing, "Good," he said, "I am glad to see that you are a modest man, M. le Comte, and that you think it too much to expect you to put your hand into a woman's bosom. However, you may reassure yourself. Even at Versailles it is not the practice to trust serious matters to women. There are no breasts here—no breasts," he repeated. "Look for yourself!"

"Good God!" said the Count. "This is beyond belief."

"My dear Count, must I give you even more proof? I tell you I have no breasts. Be a brave man and look for yourself!"

"No bosom!" Voronzov kept on repeating the words, "No bosom? What on earth does it all mean?"

He began to unlace Eon. When the Chevalier had his stays in his hand he slit open a seam and drew out a paper. "Here are my plenary powers." Then he took off his satin slippers and removed the lining of one of them, "And here is an explanatory letter." And finally he produced the precious Montesquieu, which he had preserved through so many adventures, and put it in the Count's hands. "Here in the binding you will find a letter from the King to the Empress, with my cypher and a cypher which can be used to correspond with Versailles."

"Well, wonders will never cease," said the Count, gazing at Eon. "Who on earth are you, anyhow?"

"I am the Chevalier d'Eon."

The Count was like a balletomane who suddenly sees a

dancer carry out some incredible movement of which all dancers have dreamed, but no one has ever before succeeded in executing. He could not contain his admiration.

"Astonishing!" he kept saying. "Really astonishing! Please don't move, Chevalier. The illusion is really perfect. A Chevalier—yes, obviously—and yet . . ."

"This old man annoys me," thought Eon. "All that interests him is my disguise. But that is just foolery. What is important is the ideas I have in my mind; the diplomatic opportunity ought to make him kneel down and shout for joy."

Suddenly Voronzov became serious again. "It was high time for this," he said. "A week ago we signed a treaty of alliance with London, offensive and defensive. But you need not worry. It is not completed yet; it is still only a piece of parchment."

There was a moment's silence. Voronzov was thinking that when all was said and done he himself was running some risk of accompanying Mme de Walberg to Siberia. He looked at his watch.

Eon had dressed himself again and was now once more a Maid of Honour of the Empress, with his hands demurely folded over his bosom, listening quietly to what the Vice-Chancellor had to say. But Voronzov realized that under the feminine head-dress there was a very shrewd masculine brain, and this gave him the courage to talk, from the start, more freely perhaps than he had ever talked to anybody before.

"I am going to tell you the whole story without hiding anything. The danger is great enough to justify my doing so. You and I, for we are both together from now on, have two enemies here. The first is Williams, the English Ambassador, a man of subtle intelligence, crafty, suspicious and unscrupulous. He has money, plenty of it. He can hire a murderer—and more than that, he can and does hire spies, whom he places everywhere. He knows everything that happens; the slightest whim of the Empress, the most secret decision of the Council, are all revealed to him. Fortunately, he has such a contempt for women that when you arrived here he only noticed Douglas, and his whole attention has been concentrated on him. Consequently, he thinks that he has won the game. You are a mere shadowy figure to him. You must remain so. Our second



enemy is the Chancellor. Have you ever seen a bear? Yes, of course you have, but in your country they are on show at the fairs and their keepers make them dance to their batons. But here we have bears which live in the forests and there is nothing tame about them. They are wild beasts and it is best to keep out of their way. Bestoucheff is one of those. His den is in the Palace. The Empress, after all, is but a woman, and this coarse fellow dominates her by his violence and his sullen temper. He is the only man who is allowed to grumble in her presence and to speak bluntly to her. It is true that he is greedy for money; but you must realize that there is no question of bribing him; the day is gone when even a king could do that, although the Chancellor is quite ready to take anything he is offered. The point is that he has complete control of the treasury of the State. Lastly, we come to the Empress . . .”

He paused for a moment and looked at Eon. “Naturally,” he said, “you see her as a Byzantine Empress holding in her hand an orb with a cross on it. In real life she is quite different.”

“Is she beautiful?” asked Eon quickly.

“She is forty-five,” answered the other, “and ravaged by a quarter of a century’s excesses. She is too red in the face, and her complexion has been destroyed by nights of debauchery or the orgies at the balls in which she had taken part. When she drinks too much, she is not attractive.”

“Does that often happen?”

“Oh yes, Chevalier. On those occasions she is said to be suffering from migraine.”

“But, even so, she is a clever woman?”

“She certainly has sharp eyes. She is shrewd, and it is not easy to hide anything from her.”

“What about her character?”

“If she was a man, one would say that she was good-natured. It is understood that no one must be put to death while she is on the throne; that is to say no one must be shot, hung or quartered. She has sworn it on the image of St. Nicholas, and she will keep her oath. But there is nothing to prevent a man having his ears cut off or his nose cut off or slit, or his eyes put out, or being flogged with the knout. Men may be hung from trees by the arms or the feet, they may be crucified or even

thrown into the river, provided they are alive at the time. Apart from all this, when she is in a good humour, no one could be more kind."

"In part you might say that she is a philosopher?"

"Ah! there you are. You Frenchmen, when you have said that, there is nothing more to say. I have heard her laughing at God, but I don't think she ever laughs at St. Nicholas."

"Is she the slave of her passions?"

"Who is not?" said the old man, smiling. "Her heart is as big as her Empire. She has to have a new man every day, over and above her recognized lover."

"Why hasn't she married?"

"She is determined not to marry. You must know that she has a weakness for your King, and that is your trump card. It is a sentimental indulgence which she enjoys in the certainty that nothing in that direction will go beyond sentiment. Apart from that, as I said before, she has as many lovers as she wishes. But all the same, there is a recognized lover—Count Ivan Ivanovitch Schouvalov, her Chamberlain."

"Is he against us?" asked Eon.

"He is neutral," answered Voronzov, "because he is so stupid that he can't make up his mind about anything. But Bestoucheff and Williams have other allies—the Grand Duke Peter, heir-apparent of the Empress, the Grand Duchess Catherine, his wife, and her lover, Stanislas Poniatowski. That is to say, a madman, a woman who frightens me and a pretty boy."

"As for the madman and the pretty boy . . ." said Eon with a contemptuous gesture.

"I leave them to you," said Voronzov. "But the Grand Duchess Catherine is another matter. Never forget that Williams is her devoted friend. And I warn you that she is stronger than you and me, than Bestoucheff or the Empress or the whole world put together."

"Is she aiming at the Throne?"

Voronzov shook his head. "She will do nothing against the Empress, for that would only give the Throne to her husband. She is a patient woman and she will leave Nature to do its own work. The Empress is killing herself by her excesses. After

that I would give very little for the Grand Duke's chances of surviving."

He stopped speaking. A bird cried in the night.

"In fact," said Eon, "two of us are fighting against five."

"Yes; and you know what is in store for us if we lose. Schlussembourg or Siberia."

Eon laughed happily. "I have never looked forward to a game so much," he said.

## CHAPTER XI

# Highway Robbery

WINTER HAD COME suddenly, as it usually does in Russia. After several days when the sun was completely hidden by the low cloud and the whole world seemed to lie wrapped in cotton-wool, the snow began to fall, and now it covered the ground. The countryside was enveloped in a weird silence, as sleighs replaced the carriages, and the visitors found a new pleasure in gliding smoothly along the roads and tracks behind the galloping little horses with their tinkling bells, or, even more simply, in feeling their boots sink into the pure white snow as they walked over its crisp surface.

"An old man like me," said Voronzov, "may pay his court to one of the Empress's Maids of Honour without criticism. So I will put at your disposal a sum of ten thousand roubles a month. I beg you to look upon this, between ourselves, as a purely political subsidy. One of my sleighs will always be at your service, with Bragard sitting by the driver. Heart's Delight will be always by my side and will act as liaison between you and me. See to it that you bribe your chambermaid well enough to be able to depend on her. Keep little Princess Daschkoff in love with you. In love? Well, that rests between you both. I ask no questions about that. I am a man of discretion, but I have an idea of what is likely to happen when the two of you are alone together in bed. But whatever you do, don't forget that the great brute who tried his best, on Mme Walberg's orders, to kill you—and who naturally thinks, like everyone else here, that you are a woman—has unfortunately taken refuge in the household of the Chancellor."

"So he knows all about me?"

"Yes; but he is not as much interested as he ought to be. From his point of view, you are no more than a gnat. But still, don't forget that a gnat is something enough to put a bear in a rage. The Chancellor will not do anything about you officially.

But a block of wood might fall from a scaffolding and crack your skull."

Eon shook his head and smiled.

The previous day there had been a queer business at the Chancellor's palace. Bestoucheff had taken a bath in the Tartar manner in a hot room and was lying on the marble slab being massaged when he heard an uproar. His frown of irritation sent the servants scuttling off to investigate, and after a few minutes the superintendent of the baths came in and said that a great lout had turned up to offer his services to His Excellency, and that when he was told to get out he had flown into a rage, thrashed the porter and taken his cane, with which he had wounded several other servants.

"The man's strength is astonishing, Excellency. Shall we have him minced with a sword? It would be rather a waste . . ."

The Chancellor opened one eye and growled, "Bring him in and send him to me in the great hall."

A few minutes later Bestoucheff, having meanwhile taken a plunge into a cold swimming pool to freshen himself, was lying back in a deep armchair, covered with bearskin rugs and sipping a cup of Turkish coffee. In obedience to his sign, the man was brought in. His shoulders were so wide and square that he almost looked short, although he was above average height. There was a slight smile on his lips and his teeth were white, with one sharp fang protruding. His hair was black and rather frizzled. He rocked a little on his legs, which had been shackled like those of a horse put out to grass.

"You are the fellow who has been trying to kill my servants," said Bestoucheff.

"That's so, Excellency. I am the fellow."

"You know what to expect. Twenty strokes of the knout and off with you to Siberia. And you may be grateful to me for not having you killed out of hand."

"As Your Excellency pleases."

"Tell me, dog, why did you do it?"

"I wished to enter Your Excellency's service."

"As what? A porter, I suppose. Well, you should have gone to the gate of St. Petersburg. That's where they hire porters. Simon," he shouted to a much-liveried servant, who came

running at his call. "Have this man stripped and tied to the post." Then he paused and lifted his hand. "No; just a minute. Were you by any chance sent by someone who wanted to be rid of me? Eh? Did you come here with the idea of murdering me?"

The man raised his hand as if to swear his innocence.

"Never mind," said Bestoucheff. "If you have anything to say, the first stroke of the whip will get it out of you—or if not the first, at least the tenth."

A quarter of an hour later, Bestoucheff was dressed and was just putting on his cordon when a servant came to him with a smile. "If Your Excellency has never seen a bear knouted, it might be worth the trouble of having a look."

The Chancellor went out into the court. There was the man tied hand and foot to a heavy rough-hewn beam, on his face with his nose against the wood. He was covered with hair from head to foot. His back, his haunches and his buttocks were so hairy that he looked like a black man. The servants were standing round him laughing, and the one who had fetched Bestoucheff stroked him with his hand.

"It is soft to the touch, Excellency," he said. "Anybody would take it for a wild animal."

"It is a bear," said Bestoucheff. "But it must have been brought up by peasants and taught to speak Russian." Everyone laughed.

The Chancellor was proud of his strength and of his hairy chest, but this fellow made him look like a weakling. It struck him that it would be silly to thrash this bear of a man who might have been born to be his servant. For the Chancellor took great pleasure in boors of this kind. He looked on them as savage creatures who made excellent watch-dogs, and he treated them accordingly in the same way as he treated his mastiffs—plenty to eat and drink on the one hand, and on the other the chain, the collar, the whip and the privilege of biting strangers. He went close to the man: "Who sent you here?"

The man looked round at the servants and Bestoucheff waved them away. Then the man lifted his head as much as he could, and when Bestoucheff leaned down he whispered an explanation in his ear. Every now and then the Chancellor

asked him a question and shook his head at the answers. At the end of all this he turned to the steward.

"Simon," he ordered, "untie him and put him on the list of serving-men. You can call him Sacha. He speaks German and French." Then with a backward glance he added, "What a pity! It would have been amusing to see a bear flogged. Perhaps he would have roared. Yes; it's a pity!"

Two days afterwards the Chevalier had a strange adventure in which good and bad fortune were so curiously mixed that he said to himself that Lady Luck had a pretty sense of humour. He had spent the evening, in his usual feminine role, at Count Voronzov's house, where he had met Lord Ferrers and his wife. Lord Ferrers was not only a mathematician of note and a member of various learned bodies, but he was one of the most distinguished admirals in the British Navy. At the moment he was passing through St. Petersburg, having no doubt in view the possibility of informing himself on the capacity of the harbour at Kronstadt and also the approximate strength of the Russian fleet. He was greatly taken by the charms of Mlle de Beaumont and spent the evening waiting upon her, showing all the attentiveness and gallantry which an Englishman can manage to show when under the vigilant eye of his wife. It must be admitted that that lady, who found herself rather at a loss in the frankly voluptuous atmosphere of St. Petersburg society, was nearly as much excited as her husband. She was tall and rather thin, but still young, handsome and distinguished-looking, and in spite of her respect for social conventions and her very real modesty, she had a warm nature in which physical passion played a greater part than mere sentiment. Voronzov was greatly amused by the behaviour of these two. "It will be interesting to see how this turns out," he said to himself. "Lord Ferrers has fallen in love and his wife is simply suffering from an irresistible impulse to throw herself into the arms of a person whom she believes to be a woman, but who is actually a man without her knowing it, and who fulfils all her unconscious desires. Oh, how helpless we are against the deep hidden forces of Nature!"

Both Lord and Lady Ferrers had been most anxious to escort Mlle de Beaumont home, but Eon had refused their offers. No

doubt he wanted to leave them with a feeling of frustrated desire, and as he parted from them he kissed the Englishwoman affectionately and gave Lord Ferrers, as he bent over his hand, a look which would have set any man's heart on fire.

It was a pitch dark night. Halfway between the Voronzov Palace and the Winter Palace, where the Empress was living at the time, the sleigh ran into an enormous mound of snow, bounced off it and turned over. The shock was so violent that Eon rolled over and over like a ball right into the middle of the street. He was lucky to do so, for the sleigh turned upside down, and if he had stayed in it he would have been killed. He picked himself up in silence, but Heart's Delight, who was the only person accompanying him, was caught up in the front of the sleigh and tangled in the reins and the process of getting free was long and noisy. Meanwhile, the driver ran away as fast as he could.

"It wouldn't surprise me, Madame, if the rascal did that on purpose," said Heart's Delight.

Eon nodded. "Probably that's why he is running so fast!"

The shaft had snapped and one of the runners was bent. Heart's Delight succeeded in putting the sleigh upright again, but could not get it to move. Then, while he was thus busied, they heard an outburst of laughter from quite close at hand, and several shadows gathered out of the night. Before they had time to realize what was happening, they found themselves being attacked by half a dozen ragged young tramps, who leapt on them both, hit them with their fists and threw them on the snow, where they set about robbing them of their belongings. Although no doubt theft was their chief object those who had hold of Eon seemed to have other ideas as well, and if the two Frenchmen had understood Russian they would have heard them say, "First of all, strip her naked, brother!"

"But be very careful not to spoil her dress. It's worth twenty roubles."

"Twenty? More like fifty!"

"Anyhow, strip her, and then we can do what we like with her."

Eon offered no resistance. He had received a few blows, but nothing like Heart's Delight, who was almost unconscious and



had already lost his shoes, stockings and breeches. Soon his shirt went too and he lay mother-naked on the snow. As for Eon, they had lost no time in removing his dress and his bonnet and these were quickly followed by stays, petticoats, shoes and stockings. Now he had nothing on but a chemise, and this he himself took off very deliberately, laughing as he did so.

"By St. Nicholas!" cried one of them. "It's a man!"

"They will probably kill me now," thought Eon. There were six of them, all in rags, some with downy, unshaven chins and others with rough beards. They had already unharnessed the horses, and now they stood around glaring at him like a pack of wolves. Eon burst out into another loud laugh and one of the men cried, "It's the Devil himself! Keep away from him!"

With that they disappeared in a flash into the night—with the horses, taking all their booty with them

So Eon and Heart's Delight found themselves side by side in the snow, stark naked. The sky was cold and though luckily there was no wind they were shivering miserably.

"Madame," said Heart's Delight, "it will be difficult for me in future to avoid calling you Monsieur."

"That's what we call diplomacy, Heart's Delight. I hope you will remember that."

"Oh, I will, if we get out of this without being frozen to death. But, saving your presence, Madame or Monsieur, whichever you prefer, I fear we shall never see France again."

They shivered and their teeth began to chatter.

"We have just one chance," said Eon, "if some other belated travellers should come along."

"Will they get us out of this if they do?"

"We will rob them as we have been robbed," said Eon blandly.

At that moment a sleigh went past, drawn by a pair of grey horses.

"Well, anyhow we won't attack that lot. We had better keep down, Madame or Monsieur, in case we get arrested, for they tell me the police carry out patrols at night in sledges."

"Even that," thought Eon, "would be better than freezing to death." Already he felt ice in his veins. Then suddenly he saw, a little distance away, two silhouettes, one short and stout

which seemed to be that of a man and the other which looked like that of a young boy. He pointed them out to Heart's Delight.

"There's just what we want," he said.

The servant immediately picked up a log which was lying in the snow.

"Very well," he sighed. "Let us turn highwaymen."

The two nightbirds came up, walking quickly like people eager to get home. The man was grumbling away to himself. "Oh dear, oh dear! I shall never do that again," he muttered. "To think that that wretched woman never offered to put us up in spite of all the hints which you must have heard me giving her. Surely she must have a sofa that we could have slept on, if nothing else. We shall be lucky if we don't run into trouble. I shan't be happy till I'm in my bed."

The boy, with his neck muffled up and his cap pulled over his ears, was stuttering incomprehensibly. All of a sudden as they passed the dark corner where the two Frenchmen were lurking, the Russian felt a savage blow on the back of his neck and fell to the ground. The wretched child opened his mouth, but was so paralysed by fear that he could not utter a sound.

"Take off your clothes," ordered Eon, and in a trice the boy stood naked. Eon took everything from him—breeches, boots, shirt and coat. Meanwhile, the father recovered from the shock only to find himself stripped of everything he had been wearing, under the threat of Heart's Delight's cudgel. There they were, the two of them, trembling with fright and suffering so much from the cold that they were on the verge of tears.

Thereupon, Eon and his follower withdrew from the scene, excusing themselves most politely. After they had taken a few steps the others began to shout curses after them. They went straight ahead while their victims' cries for help rang through the frosty air. The two Frenchmen, however, now warmly wrapped in their stolen garments, felt the blood flowing in their veins again and trod the snow lightheartedly. They were walking at hazard, for they knew nothing of the layout of the town. Their idea was to make their way back to Voronzov's palace, as it would not be wise to appear at the Winter Palace in their present get-up. So they followed the canal and crossed a bridge,

and after seeing a church which seemed familiar to them they suddenly found themselves on the bank of the Neva. A few yards away they saw a red glow, and as they drew nearer they could make out a number of people about a brazier from which darted long tongues of flame.

"That is a police post," said Heart's Delight.

"The police will put us on our way," said Eon. "One of them might even come with us."

He felt in his pockets. "Good," he said. "That fool of a Russian who is even now surrendering his blameless soul to the God of Winter, had a few coins in his pocket. Prudent citizen! They'll be enough to bribe the policeman."

Heart's Delight had mastered about a dozen words of Russian, but did not need them all to ask for Count Voronzov's palace. Hearing the jingle of coins in Eon's hand, one of the policemen was already offering his help when a babel of shouting broke out. A man who had come up wrapped in an old rug, had let it drop on the ground and hurled himself at Heart's Delight uttering all sorts of furious accusations. His shouts of rage were only too easy to understand. He pointed, "My coat! My cap! My breeches! My boots!" At the same time the boy shouted at Eon in a high-pitched voice. When the father heard Eon rattling the coins under the nose of the policeman he began louder than ever, "My money!"

Heart's Delight, finding himself hard-pressed, knocked the citizen down, while Eon kept shouting till he was hoarse, "Count Voronzov! Count Voronzov!" Both of them cried again and again, for all the neighbourhood to hear, that they were Frenchmen. The policemen put their fingers in their ears, but all the same they were impressed, for anyone who was French was likely to be the secretary of somebody of importance. Suddenly the Inspector raised his hand for silence.

"Whose is this?" he asked pointing to the cape hanging from the shoulders of Heart's Delight.

"Mine!" shouted the Russian, trembling as much with rage as cold. "Mine!" firmly answered Heart's Delight. The Russian claimed that he could prove ownership; there was a handkerchief in one of the pockets, but Heart's Delight was quick to use it and blew his nose; there was a cut in one of the boots,

but Heart's Delight swore he himself had done that. The whole argument was conducted to the accompaniment of a torrent of curses and insults while the Inspector banged furiously on the table in a vain attempt to get things under control. The name of Count Voronzov, which Eon kept on repeating all the time, terrified him. "If they are really in the Count's service," he said to one of his men, "God knows what sort of mess we may get into."

Then with a shrug of the shoulders, he waved them all four to the brazier. They huddled close to it, the two Russians shivering and still pouring out floods of abuse, the two Frenchmen snugly wrapped in their capes and chattering happily.

Meanwhile, the good Inspector was getting more and more excited, calling to witness all the policemen present as well as all the saints of the Orthodox calendar, and holding forth: "Go on, warm yourselves—cook yourselves if you like. Some time we shall find out what it's all about. . . . How do you expect me to tell who a pair of breeches belong to? Yes, I know you speak Russian. But does the other man look like a thief? Not to me . . . no! Well, then? Perhaps you sold him your cape—and your cap—and your boots?"

Suddenly he stopped talking, as a loud jingling of sleigh-bells was heard on the bridge. Then they heard the clatter of horses being driven furiously, and a confused uproar in which they could distinguish human voices. A coachman in the livery of a great house jumped down and shouted peremptorily. The Inspector assumed the air of a great landowner talking to his serfs. "Throw these dogs out of here," he shouted to his men, winking at Eon and Heart's Delight and pointing to the two Russians. For he did not want people of high standing to be shocked by the sight of two fellows half-covered by filthy rugs, and in any case he thought the citizen and his son were making a nuisance of themselves. So they were kicked into the little cell where drunkards were shut up, just as Voronzov himself appeared on the scene followed by Lord and Lady Ferrers, and all these fine folk advanced on Eon with open arms, while Heart's Delight withdrew to a discreet distance.

"An adventure by night in St. Petersburg is unfortunately common enough, dear Mlle de Beaumont," cried the Count.

"Do not be too angry with our excellent police force and its worthy inspectors. They will catch the robbers and send them to Siberia. But see how much more sensible it would have been to accept Lord Ferrers' protection."

"I will never leave you alone again," cried Lord Ferrers, covering Eon's hands with kisses, while Milady hugged him and rattled on. "Darling, tell us . . . you must tell us all about it, everything. Anyhow, you haven't come to any harm. Quite naked in the snow! Oh, God! What an experience for a young girl like you, my dear. And your servant . . .? I hope he behaved well, anyhow. He did? He turned his back, did he? Oh well, he is French after all, so I'm not surprised. But what a town, John! What a town, my dear Léa! What a town! Oh, my dear Count, you must forgive me, but it is a woman's heart speaking, a woman who dearly loves her little friend!"

Voronzov laughed. Unfortunately, he agreed, things were not all they might be in St. Petersburg after dark, and the town was still very badly lit. But after all, luckily there was no harm done, and even if Mlle de Beaumont's modesty had received a shock, at least her virtue had not suffered.

Lord Ferrers was still worried. He pointed out that Mlle de Beaumont could not spend the night in this police station, where she had already been far too long. He soliloquized aloud with an air of compassion:

"What, go back to the Empress's young ladies at this hour of night? Quite impossible. She must come back either with the Count or with us. Would you trust her to us for the night, Count? We will take the dear child back to-morrow morning as early as possible, without fail, to her honourable duties."

Voronzov bowed. Once more Eon embraced Lady Ferrers tenderly and Lord Ferrers looked on sympathetically. A man in love is always anxious for his wife to be devoted to the person he loves. In a casual way he handed out some money to the policemen, who saluted him.

In the sleigh Eon snuggled up to Lady Ferrers. "Thank God, my sweet," said that good lady, "you are safe from those ruffians." She hugged the Chevalier tightly to her, while on the other side her husband was pressing his hand with clumsy fervour, sighing deeply all the while.

"Which room are you going to give your young friend?" asked Lord Ferrers. "The blue or the green?"

His wife stamped her foot. "Oh," she said, "you are always the same. Certainly the Scots are the hardest people on earth. You have a flint for a heart. I suppose you think you have done your whole duty by this child when you offer her a glass of punch and a bed. Thank Heaven, I don't have to listen to you. She has suffered, John, and if you can't understand that, it is because you haven't the least sensibility. She needs someone to love her and pet her, don't you understand? And the only person here who can do that is me!"

"I quite agree . . ."

"And so she shall not sleep anywhere except in my room and in my bed."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Lord Ferrers with a trace of annoyance.

"Just what I say. Have I expressed myself obscurely or badly? My bed, I say, my bed. Next to me. And I will give her one of my nightgowns."

Her husband laughed a little, in a polite way. "The nightgown will be too long for her," he said with a quizzical glance at his wife, who was several inches taller than Eon.

Lady Ferrers took the tone of lady of the house who brooks no argument. "Dear Léa will be all the better wrapped up for that," she answered.

There was no use trying to argue with a woman who had already made up her mind with all the obstinacy of which an Englishwoman is capable. And Eon added to the effect by throwing herself on her knees beside her, all forlorn in her boy's clothes, and laying her head on her breast, while the good lady sighed, "Good Heavens! How sweet she is. What a charming child!"

Lady Ferrers would have been very shocked if she had known what was passing through the charming child's head at that moment. Eon was thinking something like this: "To hell with these loving women! How I wish I really were the woman I'm supposed to be, so that I could worm my way into the Admiral's secrets, for I am sure he has plenty and important ones at that. Instead of which, here I am under his roof, forced

to spend my time holding hands with his wife! Oh, Mme de Rochefort, if you could see me now, how you would laugh, cruel woman that you are! I am sure you would have a good laugh with the Duc de Nivernais or some other friend of yours. . . . But that's not the worst part of it. What's going to happen to-night, when I'm in bed with Lady Ferrers? How am I going to hide the position from her? It's all very well dealing with a little Princess Daschkoff. She will do what she's told. But what will this woman do when she finds out? Hysterics . . . panic . . . flying for help? Probably. And that will be the end of my mission."

Meanwhile there was nothing to be done, and no possibility of getting out of the mess. Lady Ferrers was smiling with hypocritical sweetness at her husband's furious face, and she kept on hugging Eon with all her strength and murmuring, "The poor child is dying of exhaustion. Come along, darling. You badly need some rest."

In the middle of the night Lord Ferrers awoke with a start, thinking he heard a scream. At the same time his valet rushed into the room. "Someone cried out in the house, Milord," he said. Lord Ferrers snatched up his watch. He had been scarcely an hour asleep. The two men listened intently.

"Perhaps it was a noise in the street."

"No, no, Milord," said the valet, who was still upset. "It was in the house."

Lord Ferrers thought at first of waking the whole household, but he was afraid of looking ridiculous. He took his pistols and went into the passage, followed by his man. The house appeared to be perfectly peaceful. The Ambassador's bulldog was asleep in a corner on an old rug and he acknowledged the two men by wagging his stump of a tail without disturbing himself. Lord Ferrers listened outside the door of his wife's room. There was not a sound. Nothing or nobody seemed to be stirring throughout the house.

"I thought I recognized her ladyship's voice," said the valet.

Lord Ferrers shrugged his shoulders, "We must have made a mistake," he said.

Lady Ferrers was up and about early the next morning. Eon was at her heels, still dressed as a boy, for, as Lord Ferrers

had maliciously pointed out, he was much smaller than his hostess and could not wear her clothes. But as the valet was a little wisp of an Irishman, Lady Ferrers had handed over to the Chevalier the servant's best suit, and now she made her entry her arm round his shoulders. "What do you think of my little friend's latest disguise?" she asked.

Lord Ferrers came forward and kissed Eon's fingers, while Eon dropped a curtsy to him. "There is no more charming sight," he said, "in all the dominions of the Empress Elizabeth."

"You mean in all the world," said his wife.

After Eon had had a little refreshment, the good Ferrers could not rest until they had escorted their "little friend" back to the Palace. Hardly anybody was stirring when they got there. A handful of roubles threw the chambermaid into a frenzy of curtsies. When Eon appeared in his amusing clothes, little Princess Daschkoff, who had spent the night in tears, threw herself into his arms.

"Ah!" she cried. "I knew it all the time. . . ."

"Alas, darling," said Eon, jokingly, "this is only a disguise. I am still your Léa."

"Will you please be quiet," said the Princess, blushing. And pressing herself against his breast she murmured, "Oh, never go away again, I implore you. I love you! I love you!"

There was still half an hour to go before the Misses' rising time; the Chevalier stripped naked in an instant and leapt into the Princess's bed. "I have been frozen all night," he said. "Darling, come and warm me up again."



## CHAPTER XII

# The Empress Elizabeth

IN THE EMPRESS'S waiting-room Voronzov sat close to Léa de Beaumont and leaned towards her. He had put down his portfolio on the bench between them. He spoke to her in a low voice. "Take the letter on top, there. It is for you, from Versailles. I had it from the hands of a Dutch trader who is under an obligation to me and is the soul of discretion. The secret council knows nothing about it. It has not been opened."

He added with a faint smile at the corner of his lips. "Happy Beaumont who can get news from Versailles," and wagging an admonitory finger, "You must tell me all about it." Then he hurried away, laughing.

Alone in his room Éon threw the letter on his bed. "Ah," he said to himself, "I recognize your seal, you treacherous woman. Oh, yes, I know it. It is yours, Mme de Rochefort, who used to call me your Cherub—yours, you faithless one. What do I want with your letters, I ask you? I tore up and burned the last as I tore up and burned the first, the one from Mainz, in which you were still pretending. This time I shall burn it without reading it. What do you want to tell me now? That the Duc de Nivernais is your lover? Or du Barry, perhaps, or Sainte-Foy, or Besenval? You may keep your pretty secrets to yourself—especially as everybody at Versailles probably knows them by now."

Firmly balanced on his feet and shaking his head as he gazed at the white rectangle of the letter on his bed, he continued to insult his lady: "You have deceived me, have you? Well, Madame, what of it, for I have deceived you too. If you want names and details you shall have them. . . ." Then he shrugged his shoulders and finished loftily, "But what's the good of all this fuss?"

With that he seized the letter in both hands and was about to tear it up when suddenly he was overcome by his desperate

need for a breath of French air. After all, this letter, much as he hated the seals it bore, had come from France. True, all its contents might be lies and they might break his heart, but all the same it had been written at a little rosewood desk before a window through whose panes one could see the streets of Paris. Even the feel of it moved Eon. He sighed. "Oh, well," he said, "let us enjoy a little more suffering." And he broke the seals.

"My Cherub," wrote the Countess, "This is my second letter, the first being that which reached you at Mainz. I have not been able to write to you since you left Mainz, for I did not know the details of your journey through Germany. I had to wait until you reached the Russian Court before I could send you once more the assurance of my tenderest affection. . . ."

Eon threw himself into a chair. What? This was the second letter? In that case, what about the one at Strelitz? Suddenly there came back into his memory a little detail which had surprised him at the time; he remembered that the letter at Strelitz which had upset him so much was a little larger than the one at Mainz. Good God! It was a forgery, then! But who could have forged it? Then, as the incidents of his adventures came vividly back to him, he leapt from his chair and swore under his breath. "Hautfort! It was Hautfort and the Walberg. How can I have been such a fool?"

This letter breathed of love. The Countess confessed her passion, although with just a shade of that charming and decorous restraint which so became her. "You are always with me, my Cherub," she wrote; "you lunch and dine and sup with me. In my chair, in my coach, in town or at Court, you are by my side; I talk to you and tell you my troubles and you console me. You help me at my toilette; I shut you up with myself in my boudoir and, if I must confess it, I open my bedroom door for you every night and you do not leave it until you leave it by my side in the morning."

Eon showered kisses on the letter. "And to think that I have deceived you! Ah, sweetest creature, never again, never again. My God, that I might throw myself at your feet and ask your forgiveness a thousand times." And he uttered more sighs and kisses.

The Empress Elizabeth had at least one point of resemblance with King Louis XV. Like him, she gave audience every day to her Chief of Police, from whom she learned all those little secrets which a skilled policeman gets to know, and above all the adventures of the men and women of her Court, and particularly their love affairs. The story of the robbers, of which Eon had been the hero—or rather the heroine—had made her laugh till she cried. She had lost no time in sending for her new Maid of Honour.

Elizabeth was a woman of forty-five, of medium size, tending slightly to plumpness. She held herself very straight; her face was florid under her fair hair, and her eyes were keen. Her gestures were emphatic. One guessed that she was a pleasure-seeker, prompt to follow her first instincts. She was greatly pleased to have a Frenchwoman at her court who had come directly from Versailles, which Elizabeth herself held to be the centre of the civilized world. Even the way she curtsied was a pleasure to behold. And then, as she studied Eon's serious and yet attractive face and heard his silver-toned voice, she was suddenly overwhelmed by a new whim. She clapped her hands and called out, "Beaumont, my dear, tell me, do you read well?" And before the other could even open her mouth, she went on, "Yes? Good! You shall be my reader."

"Excellent!" thought the Chevalier. "So now I am the Empress's little dog." Meanwhile Elizabeth, after leaning forward a moment to look at him, had thrown herself back among the cushions of her sofa.

"Good Heavens, my dear! Stark naked in the snow, they tell me. Is it really true? One of my Maids of Honour, stark naked in the snow. Ha! ha! What fun you must have had!"

Then the women of the bed chamber had poured in in a chattering mob. Though Eon had not read a line of anything to the Empress, he was none the less her reader, with a room three floors above hers. He was at her disposal of course, but in practice he came and went as he wished, leaving the Palace at his own convenience and spending more time with the Ferrers than with Elizabeth, although this did not prevent him from keeping a watchful eye on all that went on in the Palace.

A man in love always talks too much, and is very prone to boast in the presence of his beloved. By nature, Lord Ferrers was anything but talkative, but Eon knew the position he occupied, as the right-hand man of the English Ambassador. During a festive supper party with Voronzov, he had managed, while warding off a questing hand, to make the genial sailor talk. He knew already from Voronzov the outline of what was happening; the Russian had told him that a treaty (of which he described the essential clauses) had just been signed between London and St. Petersburg. One day Lord Ferrers, not realizing that anyone except the Vice-Chancellor understood what he was talking about, had dwelt long enough on the matter for Eon to realize the extreme importance attached to it by His Britannic Majesty's Government. Finally, the Chevalier knew, again through Voronzov, that the text of the treaty was in the hands of Bestoucheff, who kept it locked up in a secret drawer. A few weeks later, Voronzov persuaded the Empress to ask for it. Elizabeth, whose interests lay entirely in adorning herself, was by nature far too lazy to worry herself about diplomatic business, but every now and then she was affected by a certain anxiety and would ask for a report of which she never made any use or send for a document, which she would keep for twenty-four hours and return unread. It was her way of showing that she held the whip hand. So Bestoucheff was not particularly surprised at the request. That evening Voronzov said to Eon, "It's all in your hands now. But be very careful, and please remember that I have not told you anything."

What Eon had to do was to possess himself for an hour or two of this document, which consisted simply of a few sheets of parchment in a black morocco case. The Empress was expected that evening to dress and dine and then go to the ball, after which she would have a supper-party. So she would spend time in her bedroom and dressing-room, but not in her study. This study, moreover, was little more than a show place; it was pointed out to foreign ambassadors as the very heart of high Russian politics, the centre of the spider's web. And the reader was entirely at home in the private rooms, free to go and come as she wished. Above all she was entitled to handle the books, manuscripts and prints in the library. To find her carrying a

black case in her hand would not arouse suspicion among the Empress's personal servants. It was only necessary to wait until Elizabeth went into her dressing-room. Once she was there, in the hands of hairdressers and ladies' maids, there would be nothing more to fear from her and as most of the dignitaries of the court would be occupied in getting ready for the dinner and the ball, the way would be clear. To make things even more safe, Voronzov would be interviewing the Chancellor at that particular moment.

So Eon waited until the Empress was established at her dressing-table in the throes of being made up for the evening. Then he went into her bedroom carrying in his hand a case very much like the black morocco one which contained the treaty. The room was empty. A night-light was burning before the image of Our Lady of Kazan. Eon went into the workroom, put down his own case and took up that containing the treaty. The worst was over; he went back into the bedroom and was just leaving it when he heard a hubbub above which rose the Empress's voice. "I am lost," he thought.

In the imperial bedchamber there was a space between the bed and the wall and in this space was a secret door which could only be opened from inside. The Empress therefore was the only person to open this door, if she so wished. The door opened into a little passage which itself opened into the waiting-room. This was the way taken by lovers who were not supposed to be seen. There was no danger from that quarter. Eon knew that Schouvalov, who was not only Chamberlain of the Household, but official lover as well, had been sent for, but he would arrive before dinner by the ordinary entrance. Eon had no fear of meeting anybody in the passage. So as he heard the Empress coming he ran to the secret door, opened it and slipped out into the passage; but, at the moment when he was going to slam the door after him hard enough to operate the mechanism, the Empress came in. To move would have been dangerous. There was only a little space between the door and the wall where Eon could hide in the shadow and, provided he put himself at a certain angle, could follow the Empress's movements. "I am lost," he repeated to himself. "I was seen coming in here. The Empress is afraid of being robbed. She will find me here and

have me arrested." The thought of torture passed through his mind. The boot, the ordeal by water, the knout.

Elizabeth seemed to be upset. Her hair was done, but she was not yet fully dressed and wore a dressing-gown. She shouted over her shoulder, "Leave me alone."

There was a sudden silence in the passage. Eon did not stir; he dared not draw the door towards him; the click of the spring would have led to his being discovered. He stood there, with the treaty in his hand, thinking, "One sound, a cough, a sneeze, a creaking floorboard and it will be prison, sudden death, or at the least Siberia." He already saw himself hanging by the neck in some deserted courtyard with carrion crows flapping above him. Or rotting in some damp cellar like Valcroissant. There could be no defence; once found with the treaty in his hand, all would be over.

The Empress threw a quick look around her and crossed the room to throw herself on her knees before the great ikon of Our Lady of Kazan, which hung at the head of her bed.

"Holy Mother of God," she said, "I know it was Thou who gave me Schouvalov once upon a time, and Ivan Ivanovitch whom perhaps I would have kept for ever if he had not deceived me with a washerwoman and forced me to send him to Siberia, and Simon Alexandrovitch the Cossack, and that man yesterday, the Grenadier who is nothing but an overgrown child and pleased me by his simple ways. But Catherine sent for him this morning and God knows what she may have said to him. Holy Mother of God, you see me to-day a miserable woman, though I am the mother of forty million souls! What am I to do with this Schouvalov? I have loaded him with favours; he cringes to me, he speaks honeyed words, he kisses the hem of my dress and swears that he is devoted to me body and soul. And I know it's true, but what I want is not just devotion, but a man, nothing more, and you know, Little Mother, this Schouvalov has got very fat. Good cocks are never fat—you know that, Little Mother—and yet here I am tied to him and doomed by force of habit to stay tied to him. By force of habit, yes, and the feelings of certain regiments who worship him. Little Mother, Bestoucheff tells me that such happens even at Versailles, where Louis no longer loves the Pompadour, but that he also

has to keep her, partly for the look of things and because a king must have an official mistress. All the same, he has others, and I too, who am not married and who now can never marry at all, I have other lovers. But it is so difficult to choose them wisely. Holy Mother of God, I have never hidden anything from Thee. Thy ikon is always over my bed and I have given gifts to Thy church—vessels of gold and silver censers, and mitres to Thy priests. Counsel me, Mother of God. Preobrajenski is full of fine-looking men, but who knows what lies hidden beneath a fine appearance? And Simeonovsky, what about him? And Ismaelousky? And the dragoons of the Guard? And the Cossacks? It may be that the finest looking of all these have only enlisted to have a chance of assassinating me. My nurse told me that she saw in a mutton bone which she held between her eyes and the sun that someone was going to rob me of a treasure. I pray Thee to blind the eyes of the thief. And give me a sign which regiment you favour. Little Mother, if the fly which is buzzing against the window-pane goes upwards it will be Preobrajenski, if it goes downward it will be Ismaelousky, to the right for Simeonovsky and to the left the dragoons. And if it flies right away, far from the window, that means the Cossacks. I beg Thee, Little Mother, to guide me in my choice so that I may not bring a murderer into my bedroom, or upset the feelings of one of my regiments. And tell me, please, whether it is best to choose an officer or a soldier. The officers brag and I am obliged to have them arrested as they leave my room, because of Schouvalov's jealousy. But a soldier is sometimes gross in his behaviour, and I find it hard to be treated like a peasant's woman, and then there are boastful words again and even filthy drawings on the barrack walls.

"And, I pray Thee, strike my enemies with fever, Little Mother; spoil the beauty of the Grand Duchess Catherine, give her Pole the mange, and as for her husband, make him die of some disease which the doctors know nothing about, but which Thou knowest, Sovereign of Heaven! If he dies, Catherine will go back to Germany and I—I shall live here peacefully with only a wretched child for my heir, a child whom people call Catherine's, but who, as Thou knowest, is really mine—and he would not cause me any anxiety. . . ."

Minute after minute passed thus in a long pouring out of complaint, supplication and promise. "Well! Well!" said Eon to himself. "This is indeed the other side of a royal life." But he felt that his life was more in danger than ever, for he could not imagine that, if the Empress discovered him now, she would show any mercy to one who had heard this singular prayer in which she poured out in naked words the fear that lay in her heart.

"Oh! Little Mother," said a voice.

The Empress leapt to her feet in one bound and Eon suddenly saw her as a tigress disturbed in the midst of her love-making. Her face was strained, her jaws were locked and her eyes blazed. From the place where he stood, Eon could not manage to see the man who had spoken. Obviously he was a soldier—the soldier about whom the Empress had just been speaking.

"Who let you in here?" she cried in a harsh voice.

"It was Thou, little mother, who sent for me from the barracks."

The Empress was panting. Probably she remembered that she had in fact sent for this man and then changed her mind at the sight of the marvellous Georgian musician who played the serpent. Without speaking, she took from a silver cup a handful of gold pieces. The man had his cap in his hand.

"Hold out your cap," she ordered; into it she threw the money and then, looking him in the face, she said, "You want a woman, do you? Well, I will give you one. Nurse. . . ."

An old woman hastened in.

"Call the French girl!"

Now Elizabeth was laughing at her own joke, and so that she might laugh more easily she had thrown herself into a chair. Eon, when he heard this order given, had plucked up courage to take one or two soft steps down the passage. It was his last chance. The nurse was already in the waiting-room shouting for the French girl and her voice was becoming shrill with the vibrant urgency of a bitch trained to instant obedience. Petticoats were flying in all directions in the passages and staircases. Eon strolled into the room from the secret passage and put his case down gently on the table. Then with a lift of the eyebrows



at all this uproar among the slaves, he casually asked, "What now?"

At the sound of his voice the nurse swung round and let loose in his face a flood of insults. Eon shrugged his shoulders, "I don't understand you."

But the nurse, seizing him by the wrist, the arm and the shoulder, half-pushed, half-dragged him to the door and thrust him into the bedroom. He curtsied from the doorway.

"Ah! Beaumont," said the Empress. "Here you are at last. Where have you been? My dear, I present to you my lover of yesterday. What do you think of him?"

Eon nodded briefly to the man and said with an air of admiration, "Since Your Majesty has so distinguished him, he must be the finest man in the garrison of St. Petersburg."

"I am making you a present of him," said the Empress.

Eon made a low curtsy and rose with a smile. "What should I do with him, Majesty?"

"What a woman does with a man, of course."

"With a man who pleases her, Majesty."

"Beaumont," said the Empress, "it is sufficient that he should please me for him to be acceptable to you. At least, that is the way we look at it in Russia."

She was looking petulant now, like a woman who is not prepared to be argued with. Was it not obvious that a man good enough for a sovereign was good enough for a reader? "She won't give in," thought Eon; "and I have my treaty to think about." He curtsied again, lower than ever, and, beckoning the man, who had stood gaping throughout this exchange, he went out.

"All these Frenchwomen are cynical," muttered Elizabeth to herself, and turning back she fell on her knees again before the ikon of Our Lady of Kazan. "Mother of God, Holy Mother of God, aid me, I implore Thee!"

Eon went slowly up the staircase to his room, followed by the soldier. This man tried several times to start a conversation, but each time Eon merely smiled and pointing to his mouth repeated the single word, "Franzouski."

The soldier, in any case, did not seem to be in the best of tempers, and Eon reflected that that was not surprising. After

all, he had held an Empress in his arms, and now all his great ambitions had dissolved in smoke. Think what his dreams must have been. He would have seen himself colonel, general, Controller of the Household . . . yes, even Emperor—why not? After all a soldier who finds himself sprawling in the bed of an Empress, must say to himself, "I will never let her go, or even if I do I will get her back, and money and honours into the bargain." Instead, all of a sudden, he finds himself thrown out. The jeers of his comrades will break his heart to-night. And what consolation is there in a handful of money in his cap? Or in a waiting-woman either, for that matter. "And the worst of it all," thought Eon, "is that he doesn't know what is in store for him."

At the top of the palace there were several floors given up to servants and members of the household, and it was there that Eon had his room. There was no one at all in the passages, for at that hour of the day everybody, man or woman, was engaged in some duty or other. Eon stopped suddenly at one of the doors, held it open for the grenadier to pass in and then shut and bolted it. The soldier took a step or two forward and looked first at the bed and then at Eon. This pretty young woman astonished him; he was accustomed to great Russian wenches, with backs and shoulders like pieces of furniture, and this little creature made him curl his lips in contempt. But suddenly Eon took down from the wall two swords which were hanging there, the same stout swords which had served him so well throughout his travels and throwing one to the man, he cried, "Look out for yourself!"

The Russian had hardly time to take up his guard, so hard-pressed was he by Eon. He was growling like a dog and Eon guessed that he must be saying to himself, "Now what the devil is all this about? Is it some trick the Empress is playing on me? In that case, I suppose this is a man in disguise? And yet he is so tiny!" In his nervousness, he made a poor show of defending himself, and in any case he was an infantryman who was not accustomed to handle a sword. Eon had a feeling of pity for the poor devil at first, but he remembered that he had the treaty there and must take a copy of it. It was no use indulging in futile sentiment. He aimed for the man's heart and

lunged as hard as he could. His only fear was that he might come up against a rib, but luckily his sword ran between two ribs and sank in as if passing through a bundle of hay. The man opened his mouth, dropped his sword, which clattered on the floor, fell on his knees and finally rolled over on his face.

"He will never boast of his love affairs again," said Eon to himself. He went to the man, who had ceased to move, felt his pulse and found no response. "Good!" he said. "The Empress Elizabeth is short of one soldier." With that he opened up the treaty, which was signed by Bestoucheff and Williams and bore the seals of Britain and Russia, and set himself urgently to the task of copying it.

Elizabeth had spent more than two hours over her dressing. It needed nothing like that amount of time to copy a treaty of six pages in large handwriting. So Eon, on his way down to the dinner and ball which were to be followed by supper, had time to pay a visit to the Empress's study and to put back the official document on the writing-table without exciting any suspicion on the part of the nurse. The old woman naturally saw nothing out of the ordinary in the big, black morocco case which Eon was carrying under his arm; it seemed quite in keeping with the duties of a reader. When he appeared at the ball he whispered in Voronzov's ear, as the old man bowed over his hand, "Everything has gone wonderfully!"

"Do you know," asked the Count, "what we Russians call the sort of thing you have been doing? Pulling Death by the beard!"

They both laughed, but in the Count's laughter there was an element of pity, for he could not imagine that Eon would be able to walk this tight-rope indefinitely, and his long experience of Court life made him fear that his friend would very soon be worsted in his desperate enterprise. Anyhow, now that the treaty was in his hands, there was no more time to be lost. Eon must show himself in his true colours, give the Empress the letters from Louis XV and get an answer from her. "Of course," added Voronzov, "there is always the risk that she will take it very badly, but from what I know of her, with her obsession about men, she will be delighted by your disguise." The Count must have said the same thing in one way or another about

twenty times that evening to Eon while around them the ball-room sparkled with the glitter of diamonds reflecting the light of a thousand candles. On his way back from dancing with a magnificent officer of the Guard, Eon leaned towards the Vice-Chancellor, who was looking on with interest, but no longer caring to risk the crowded floor himself, and asked, "You have no news of Valcroissant?"

"None at all. I don't even know if he is alive or dead. But what new madness are you contemplating now? If you are not yet on intimate terms with Death, let me warn you that you can only pull his beard once. After that he is like a bear whom the hunter has merely wounded and allowed to escape; now he knows man's tricks and next time they meet he comes off best."

Elizabeth had sent her women away. She had been put to bed and given a cup of hot soup, as was done at Versailles when the King retired. Her reader, left alone with her, was smiling at her. The empress sighed. "What a day, my dear Beaumont!"

"I trust Your Majesty has at least been amused?"

"Oh! Everything is always the same. By the way, Beaumont, that reminds me. Do you know what I have just been told? That grenadier—you know, the one I gave you—has been found dead beneath your window. Can you explain that to me—or is it a story for the police?"

"Madame," answered Eon. "Nothing could be simpler. I noticed that Your Majesty was afraid of the man."

"That is true," she owned, with a shiver. "He was one of the Grand Duke's men and he has been seen at the side of the Grand Duchess, who was giving him wine. I would not have him near me again for anything in the world. It is so easy at those times to strangle a woman. He was strong—do you know that?"

"Very strong," said Eon, "as far as the muscles of his arms and legs were concerned. But not very strong with a sword,

"What do you mean?"

"We fought one another."

"*You* fought? *You*, Beaumont?"

"Yes, Madame, I fought."

"A woman . . . a little woman . . ."

"Good Heavens, yes, Madame. And I killed him. And then, as his great corpse was littering up my room, I dragged him as best I could to the window and threw him out."

Elizabeth lay back on her pillows and roared with laughter. Then she sat up again and said, "What fools the police are! They talked of a brawl, although it is true that they noticed the sword-thrust—a capital one, it seems. As for me, I thought that a lover of yours—haven't you got one, Beaumont? It would be too bad if you still had no lover—had found him in your room."

"I acted alone," said Eon.

The Empress shook her head. "Alone? A woman? That can't be true. How could you ever have learned to handle a sword?"

"That is a long story, Madame. But since Your Majesty has graciously admitted me into her intimacy, permit me to present myself in proper form." He rose and bowed. "The Chevalier d'Eon," he announced and, after a startled gasp from the Empress, continued, "Envoy Extraordinary of my master, the King of France, to Your Majesty."

The Empress seemed unable to collect herself enough to answer.

"The King," continued Eon, "is greatly concerned for Your Majesty's health and is most happy at your successes. Of all the crowned heads of Europe, Madame, yours is the only one whose doings he follows and whose progress he observes with affectionate attention. He has never forgotten . . . But perhaps I go too far?"

"No, no. Go on!" said the Empress.

"He has never forgotten how nearly he had the happiness of marrying you."

The Empress let her head fall back on her pillow. She closed her eyes for a moment and lay motionless with her mouth slightly open. She was lost in a day-dream—Prince Charming, Versailles, Queen of France. A few minutes passed thus; then she opened her eyes and sighed, "That is all past."

"Yes, Madame; no doubt it is past and will not come again. But is there anything to prevent two beings who have loved

from dreaming the past over again and tasting the savour of sweet memories?"

"Sir," said the Empress, "you have my attention."

Without further words, the Chevalier showed her his plenary powers, and then the explanatory letter which until now he had carried in the sole of one of his shoes, and finally, producing his Montesquieu, he opened the binding with the Empress's golden scissors and, with a low bow, offered her his sovereign's letter, laid on the cover of the book.

The Empress was blushing. She read the letter once and then a second time. Then she raised her head and looked at Eon. "You have been very lucky to be able to bring me this," she said, then added after a moment's thought, "and very brave!"

Eon thought of Valcroissant and of the miserable thoughts which must have passed through that poor wretch's mind in the dark dungeons of Schlussembourg.

"Here is the cypher which the King, my master, suggests Your Majesty might use to correspond with him."

But the Empress drew back hastily. "No, no," she said. "Voronzov will do that; not I." Eon realized that she was not skilled in these matters; it was not she who really governed, and she was dismayed by the machinery of intrigue. But for him it sufficed that Voronzov had permission to carry on. Meanwhile, Elizabeth had taken up the King's letter again and was brooding over it with many sighs. She dragged herself out of her dream and pointed to a small chest, which she ordered Eon to hand to her. It was of wrought iron, apparently of Persian craftsmanship, and Eon noticed that the Empress wore the key on a chain round her neck. She threw the two letters into it.

"Burn your powers," she said, "and see Voronzov. And how can I reward you?"

Before Eon had time to answer, she burst out laughing. "But first of all you must resume men's clothes. In a woman's dress you are too dangerous to my girls."

"I will do as Your Majesty commands," said Eon, allowing himself a smile, "but I venture to hope that Your Majesty's court may be allowed to think that I am in disguise."

"Well, well! So you like being a woman?"

Eon smiled. "Is not Your Majesty a woman, and does she not manage to govern an Empire as well as a Peter the Great could?"

The answer pleased Elizabeth, and when she asked again, "What is to be your reward, Chevalier?" it was in almost a cooing voice.

"Ah! Madame," he said, "all my hopes will be fulfilled if I can take back to the King, my master, an answer from Your Majesty."

"That you shall certainly have. I will speak of it to Voronzov. But for yourself?"

"Well, Madame, I had a friend" (it was something of an exaggeration, but there was no other way of making the point). "He was called Valcroissant. Your Majesty may have known him?"

Elizabeth shook her head, surprised.

"In that case, I regret to have to inform Your Majesty that M. de Valcroissant had been sent to Your Majesty by my King before I was, but evidently he never had the good fortune which I have had to speak to Your Majesty in private. In short, there has been a misunderstanding, and I must tell you that my poor friend is enjoying the Empress's hospitality, but in the worst possible conditions, as a prisoner in Schlussembourg."

"Oh, heavens!" said Elizabeth. "I knew nothing at all about this."

"These are your rulers," thought Eon. "They shut people up in prison and forget all about them." Aloud, he said, "I know, of course, as everyone in Europe knows, that your Majesty is the incarnation of mercy in her time, just as the Emperor Augustus was in his, and since she is kind enough to wish to give me something, I ask for Valcroissant."

"It is granted," said Elizabeth, "but it is a poor enough present."

She drew from her finger a ring in which an enormous diamond sparkled. "This is for you, sir. And as the ring carries my cypher, it may be of use to you some day."

Elizabeth stared curiously at Eon. The person that she saw in front of her eyes had all the outward semblance of a woman, even now. But it went about killing guardsmen—so it must

surely be a man. But how tiny! And yet, on the other hand, how brave!

"You are quite sure you don't want anything more?"

The Empress's eyes shone like precious stones. When Eon threw up his arms to show that he felt embarrassed, she burst out laughing again. "What a child you are! Good night! Leave me to sleep."

Eon bowed and left her. In the passage he could hear the Empress still laughing. "The devil!" he thought as he climbed the stairs, so full of elation that his feet seemed to have wings. "Can she be making a fool of me?" But he stifled the silly idea as soon as it came into his mind. There was not much doubt about the diamond, and Elizabeth's twofold promise was still echoing in his ears. Eon was delighted. He walked among the angels in the limpid air of the seventh heaven.



## CHAPTER XIII

# Essay in Gallantry

SOME DAYS STAND out above the rest. Nor are they necessarily feast days, though a festive occasion may form a background for them even as the notes of a guitar may be faintly heard above the screams of a murdered man. Neither are they days of great change of season, as when spring is born or winter comes, when the ice begins to crackle on the river or the first snow begins to fall. They may indeed coincide with those when these things happen, but in themselves are routine days, normal and tedious, full of work and trouble and misery—and perhaps a little pleasure too. Part of the daily round. But into them throng a crowd of headlong events, just as the beasts of the forest rush into the hunters' nets.

This particular day was most certainly Eon's day, or rather that of Léa de Beaumont, since only the Empress and Voronzov knew the truth about his sex. His ears should indeed have burned, for apart from the Palace, where the Empress was reading and re-reading the King's letter, there was talk about him in three places in St. Petersburg.

To begin with, at Schouvalov's. The Chamberlain, Elizabeth's official lover, was making up his accounts. His steward, with a fat book in his hand, was calculating the value of lands, pensions, investments.

"Three thousand acres in the Government of Orel. Ten thousand in that of St. Petersburg; Great Novgorod, five thousand; Viazma, seven thousand; Riga, twelve thousand. Sixty-three villages in all. Nineteen thousand seven hundred and fifty souls." He turned a page. "Forests. In the Government of Toula . . ."

"That's enough!" said Schouvalov. "Get out of here!"

The steward shut his book, bent double in taking his leave and fled. Schouvalov, beside himself, went on shouting at him

long after he was out of reach at the bottom of the staircase. "The fool! Listen to him! Villages! Investments! Pensions! Am I a fat citizen of St. Petersburg to waste my time with all that nonsense? I don't even know where these forests, or these villages are! They have given me all that, but they can just as easily take it all away again. What matters to me is not a thousand acres more or less, or even ten thousand or a hundred thousand, but my job. Not the Chamberlain's job, either, I assure you, but the other. As long as I have that, I have everything. But when I cease to be the Empress's lover I shall cease to be anything. Anything at all! Except a candidate for Siberia. I shall have become a bore, and when one is a bore . . . !"

The day before, the Empress had introduced to him a little wiry fellow, with a cold expression, a Frenchman whom she called her reader. It seemed that the day before that, this little man, this reader, had been a Frenchwoman. What was the catch? Was it a woman in disguise? What if it were really a man? Then, Schouvalov knew only too well that his sovereign lady would want to try him. And after that what might happen?

Schouvalov remembered La Chetardie, a former ambassador of the French King who had been Elizabeth's lover before she came to the throne. He knew that she had a passion for everything connected with Versailles—manners, ideas, intelligence, everything. A Frenchman could do anything he wanted with her. This little Frenchman was obviously dangerous; he must be got rid of. He jumped off his bed and shouted. Servants hurried up. "I shall go and see Prince Daschkoff," he said to himself. "That's the best thing. His daughter slept in the same room as the Frenchwoman when she was a maid of honour and they shared a bed. The little Princess . . . yes, the little Princess must know. By God, she must! If she knows too much and gives it away by blushing, what then? Well, her father will whip her, I suppose, and when he has whipped her he will go and complain to Her Majesty. And if there is a scandal—well, so much the better. . . . Yes, by God, so much the better!"

At the same moment the English Ambassador was leaning against the Chancellor's mantelpiece, grumbling as only an Englishman can grumble when he has a cold and has been offered Vodka instead of his beloved whiskey.

"Well, my dear Chancellor," he said, "I too have my sources of information."

He raised his nose in the air trying to make it look impressive, but unfortunately it was a small snub, lost between two puffy cheeks, above a bulldog jaw. All the same, it suggested a full measure of arrogance and he trumpeted through it as though it were an elephant's trunk.

"Yes, sir, I have my sources; and let me tell you that the enemy is within the walls. Yes, sir, within the walls, not far from you and very close to the Empress. There is some sort of Frenchman here." He shifted his legs and went on. "I can smell them a long way off. When that Douglas arrived I spotted him at once as an enemy. A Scotsman, certainly, but a Roman, a Jacobite. It didn't take me long to find out where he came from, or at least to suspect it. Now this Douglas has gone again. But there were two of them, with two servants, French or German, I don't know which, who lost themselves in the town. You don't watch these lackeys closely enough, Chancellor; they are a cunning breed of rascal. Anyhow, the principals were two—Douglas and a woman. Now, where is this woman? I didn't worry about her to begin with. I despise women. I took this one to be a milliner, a purveyor of fashions such as one finds in Germany hanging round the frontier trying to find some reputable person to escort them as far as the capital—and once they get there, your good ladies arrange for the opening of a nice little shop and there is one more adventuress nicely fixed up. But the one I am talking about had done better than that. They tell me that she carried letters. From whom, I ask you, and for whom? Not for you, obviously, nor for me! For whom, then? She was received immediately among the Empress's Maids of Honour and then became Her Majesty's reader. And this, mark you, is Douglas' sweetheart."

"His niece," put in the Chancellor.

"Niece, mistress, servant, cook, lady's maid, adviser or accomplice—I don't know or care, but I do know that she came with him from France across Germany."

"Bah!" said the Chancellor. "A woman . . ."

"Yes, that's what I said, a woman! But we have drawn up a treaty and signed it, and we thought the business was all

settled. And now, there is the Empress sending for the original document. Why?"

"Voronzov."

"But the treaty was signed. It could not be changed now. Voronzov may possibly have wanted the text in his hands so that he could tell the Empress that we were making her play a dangerous game. But the fact remains that the document was not asked for until Mlle de Beaumont got into the palace as reader."

"That girl a secret agent?" asked Bestoucheff. "Come, come! I have seen her with Voronzov and with the Empress. She is just a little bird."

"In my country," growled the Englishman, "we have little birds who do a great deal of damage to the crops."

The Chancellor shrugged his shoulders. "I should have thought that I was a good enough scarecrow. But if you think a shotgun would be better . . ."

The Ambassador got up. "Oh," he said, "I don't expect you to hang her, but you might send her to Siberia, or at least send her packing to where she came from. Listen. I will tell you something quite between ourselves which worries me—in fact, I'm ashamed of it. You know Lord Ferrers, how important and useful he is? Well, he is mad about this girl. And Lady Ferrers is mad about her too. It's a fact! And one night after some business or other about highway robbery, this devil of a Frenchwoman spent the night in their house. Now what do you say to that?"

"I say, my dear Ambassador, that if you want her hanged, hanged she shall be."

"Hanged? Hanged? In England we are generous-minded. Hanged? No! But Siberia or back to the West—that would be a good idea."

"Very well," said Bestoucheff.

Five minutes later, after the Ambassador had gone, the Chancellor sent for the man who had made such a strange entrance into his household, and was now known there as the Bear. As soon as he saw him he called out, "Here," as one might to a dog. The man came and stood close by his side. He bent his shoulders and bowed his head a little

in such a way that he was able to look up at his master from below.

"Show me your hands," said the Chancellor.

The man stretched out two huge hands. The palms were large and thick and the fingers heavy. The thumbs, which stood out by themselves, were twice as large as those of an ordinary man.

"Have you ever strangled anyone?"

"Only a dog."

"A woman is just as easy. Listen to me carefully while I tell you what to do."

He leant over the man and described to him the place and the room in it—the third on the left at the top of the staircase.

"A little woman. No need for any argument . . . not a word. Do it quickly and come away. Be very careful to make no noise."

The man they called the Bear nodded respectfully, and then, at his master's gesture he went out, backwards.

The scene changes to the palace of the Grand Duke Peter of Holstein-Gottorp, husband of the Grand Duchess Catherine and heir to the throne. Here, in a large room Catherine sat dreaming in a chair, covered with fur rugs. She was a young woman with a lofty, impressive forehead, thin lips, a strong nose and bright eyes.

"Well, have you sent for Prince Poniatowski?" she asked the serving-woman who cringed before her.

"He was still in bed, Madame. He has been called and he is dressing. But his toilet will need at least an hour, Madame."

Catherine shrugged her shoulders. There was a heavy step on the staircase and the door was thrown open violently. A man came in wearing Prussian uniform, with his hat on his head. A long sword knocked against his calves. He was soaked with snow and as he stamped on the floor and shook himself he shouted, "Is there nobody here?" Catherine made no move. "Somebody pull off my boots!"

A man rushed forward and was immediately overturned by a kick; a second man managed to seize the Grand Duke's leg. The Grand Duke hit one of them over the head and took hold of the other by the hair. Although his teeth were clenched, one could hear him swearing; "Dogs! Bloody dogs!"

They pulled off his boots and put great felt slippers on his feet. He had kept his hat on; now he threw it over his shoulder like an ill-mannered soldier. He threw himself in a chair opposite his wife and the servants left the room.

"Four hours' drill this morning. Left, right! Left, right! Four thousand men in one mass—two whole regiments. No parade-ground stuff—manœuvres in line, firing at the double. And then columns by the right and columns by the left. Four hours of it. Some of the men fell to the ground exhausted. I had them thrashed by the sergeants and I shall have them put in handcuffs. But that doesn't interest you, does it?"

He aimed a kick at Catherine's legs. She made a grimace of pain, but did not cry out.

"Well, are you listening? I tell you there were four thousand men. All Hessians. It's only the Germans who can manœuvre like that. The Russians were astonished. It is the finest profession in the world. I'm going on with the work this afternoon. Another four hours in the field. And before that the review. Spotless uniforms, perfect steadiness. I inspect each man, button by button. Oh, I'm a methodical fellow, Madame—a German, remember, a German!"

He aimed another kick at Catherine's legs. This time she gave no sign except to shrink back in her chair.

"You don't answer. No, you don't want to answer. Very well then, go to the Devil!"

He jumped to his feet and roared. Servants tumbled back into the room. He knocked down two or three of them. He jolted an arm against a porcelain vase which stood on a piece of furniture and it fell to the ground and broke in pieces. He attacked one of the servants who was rolling on the floor and beat him with his cane, shouting insults.

Catherine stood up at last. Everybody escaped and left the two of them together. The Grand Duke kicked away the fragments of the broken vase, and looked wickedly over his shoulder at his wife, who asked him calmly, "Do you think you will ever be fit to be an Emperor?"

He rushed at her with his arm raised. She held her ground, and under her steely, cold gaze he slowly dropped his arm, turned on his heel, rushed to the door and slammed it after him.

A few minutes later a tall, well-built Frenchman with a military moustache came into the room.

"Ah!" said Catherine. "It's you, Beauvallon. Listen. I have made up my mind. I will protect you whatever happens. You say that this person is the King's agent?"

"That I will swear, Madame, but whether a man or a woman, that nobody knows."

"They will find out when it comes to burying the body. Anyhow, he is dressed as a man now. Challenge him. I will do the rest."

"Yes, but . . ."

"What now?"

After a slight hesitation, he told her the story of the duel in the Temple precincts, and the wound which nearly killed him. His voice shook with rage as he protested, "He will kill me!"

Catherine laughed insolently. "Well, if it is a woman, that shows that they are sometimes more dangerous than men, even on the duelling ground." And then with a change of tone, she said in a low voice, her face close to his, "Duel or murder, as you wish. He must be removed!"

Night had fallen. The Palace seemed to be asleep. There were no festivities to-night and no ball. After a little informal dinner with a few intimate friends, at which a good deal had been drunk, the Empress had retired to her apartments. As Eon crossed the courtyard someone concealed in a carriage standing by the kerb beckoned to him. It was Voronzov.

"I have letters of introduction for you to Lestocq, the Governor of Schlussembourg. I shall also have the Empress's answer to your King. Meanwhile, she wants to see you at the Palace to-night after dinner."

The Vice-Chancellor shook him by the hand with unusual warmth and the carriage drove away.

At the stated time, Eon left his room. He was beside himself with joy. Everything was ready for his visit to Schlussembourg and, after he got back, he would be off to Paris. He pictured himself in the King's study at Versailles, explaining to him all about the Russian Court and its intrigues, and all the useful work which an intelligent ambassador might do there. "It is I," he said to himself, "who will have brought the two Courts

together. I am too young to be an ambassador myself, but to be his right-hand man would just suit me. And why not? They will see me here again, backed by the King's authority, powerful and respected. You had better look out, Master Williams. We are going to give you a lot of trouble." Eon looked very well in his Court dress. "My disguise," he thought. "Well! that's one way of putting it. I wonder what the Empress really thinks?" He shrugged his shoulders. "What does it matter, anyhow. I am sure she swears by me." In this frame of mind, with his head full of wild dreams, Eon entered the waiting-room and had himself announced. He heard a husky voice in the distance ordering him to come in, and he did so with a firm step, his hat under his arm.

Elizabeth was stretched on her bed. Above her head the image of Our Lady of Kazan shone in the light of a little silver lamp. There was no other light in the room. Beyond the bed, in the thickness of the wall, Eon could just make out the little door which had saved his life on the day when he purloined the famous treaty. The memory added to his self-confidence.

After bowing deeply he raised his eyes and found Elizabeth staring at him. She had evidently been drinking freely, as she often did, and there was still a glass and a silver jug on her bedside table. She was red in the face and breathing quickly. Her eyes were bright, but rather wild. She was leaning on one elbow, with her head resting on her hand. She seemed to have nothing on but a nightgown tied with a red ribbon at the neck, under which he could see the rise and fall of her breasts. Rugs and white bear skins were piled on top of her. The room was very hot and it was so stuffy that Eon could hardly breathe.

"Sit down," she said.

He tried to take a chair a little distance away, but she said with some impatience, "Here!" beckoning him to the bed. And she added: "I don't suppose you are afraid of me? Anyhow you Frenchmen are dangerous to all women. At least, that's what they tell me."

Eon smiled, "Nothing or nobody could be dangerous to Your Majesty."

Elizabeth ignored the remark; she began to laugh, saying, "I



have never seen a prettier little boy than you are. I must say you look even nicer like that than as a girl."

Eon bowed. "I am at Your Majesty's orders to give you all the information you may graciously wish to receive regarding the Court of France and its attitude towards Your Majesty."

"Yes, yes!" she said, with a pout.

"I shall have a great many things to tell Your Majesty, particularly about His Highness the Prince de Conti, who is Your Majesty's most devoted admirer . . ."

Elizabeth said nothing, but she had taken Eon's hand.

" . . . and whose military qualities," he went on, "are as Your Majesty must know, of superlative excellence. There will be . . ."

"Come closer," she said.

This time Eon understood. The Empress had seized him by the arm and the back of his coat and was pulling him towards her. Eon felt her hot breath, which stank of alcohol. He knew that to resist or refuse or struggle at this point would be like running aground inside harbour. It would be an end of any letter to the King, or of any chance of saving Valcroissant. His mission would have failed and he would not dare to go back. His career would be ruined. And the worst of it now was that delightful images intervened between this fury and himself. The recollection of Charlotte in her Mecklenburg palace, like a rose in the desert; nearer at hand the little Princess Daschkoff, all sweetness, freshness and innocence; and above all his beloved Rochefort, far away in Paris, with her overwhelming charms. And these memories, instead of rousing his passions, seemed, on the contrary, to deaden them and make him feel it a betrayal of those sweet creatures to abandon himself to this coarse love-making. No! the contrast was too great between his beloved's elegance and the frenzied lust of the Empress.

"Oh, Madame," he said, "the respect which I owe Your Majesty . . ."

While in his mind he wondered how he could escape, he made a desperate effort to elude his adversary's grasp without seeming to resist her. For a moment he thought that if he shut his eyes he might pretend that it was Mme de Rochefort who was clasped to him. "Come, come," he said to himself. "Use a

little imagination." And he began to whisper, "My darling . . ."

But he very nearly burst out laughing. Too obviously it was impossible to pretend. Nothing in him responded to her desire and, although he ceased to struggle against the furious demands of this harpy, he found that he could give no satisfaction. Good heavens, how du Barry and the others would have laughed if they could have seen him then. Eon was covered with cold sweat; nothing helped him, neither the heat, nor the scent, nor even the tempting images which rose in his mind. Wallowing in the imperial bed, half-dressed and held in a tight embrace under the piled-up bearskins, Eon opened his eyes to see the Empress glaring at him with a mixture of impatience, annoyance, contempt, rage and even something of shame. All this confused emotion was released at last in a howl like that of a wild beast, and with a violent movement she kicked him out of bed and on to the floor. He leapt up quickly and tried to regain his composure, and some measure of decency. But the Empress was no longer looking at him. She was shouting at the top of her voice. "Doxia! Doxia! Send for Schouvalov. At once, do you hear me? At once."

"What a mess!" said Eon to himself as he went out backwards without a word—for indeed there was no excuse to meet the situation. "It remains to be seen what will come of it." And he ran upstairs as fast as he could, to shut himself up and think the matter over quietly in his room. Little did he know of the tragedy which had taken place within its walls since last he was there.

In the morning, Schouvalov, who was worried, had paid a visit to Prince Daschkoff, the father of the little Princess who had shared Eon's room and bed. He felt that she at least must be able to set his mind at rest about the reader's sex. He explained this to the old gentleman over a dish of jam-tarts, Daschkoff's favourite delicacy, washed down with wine from the Crimea. But the little Princess, like many innocent souls, had reserves of subtlety. She chose to play the innocent and managed to parry all their questions. Finally, she asked, with tears in her eyes, "Is she ill?"

"No," said Schouvalov; "but she is in great danger, and you should realize, my dear, that the only way of saving her is to

tell us all that you know about her, any secrets she has told you."

The little Princess hesitated a moment, then shook her head and said in a low voice, "But there is nothing."

She burst into tears, but when her father shook her by the arms and pressed her, she repeated that she knew nothing more. Thereupon Schouvalov remarked, "Come, come! No one will make me believe that a Frenchman could share a bed for three months with a charmer like your daughter without making love to her. Beaumont is a woman after all!"

The two men, in their relief, enjoyed to the full another dish of jam-tarts and several more bottles of Crimean wine, while the little Princess made up her mind to hurry back to the Palace. But she could not leave until after luncheon, which in Russia is taken at two o'clock in the afternoon. So it was not until after dark—on a cold winter night—that she reached her friend's room. Eon was not there. The little Princess made up her mind to wait for him and in fondness laid herself down on his bed and did not bolt the door, for she was sure that Eon would appear at any moment. Worn out by emotion, she fell asleep.

She had not been asleep long when the Chancellor's Bear crept in. The man was heavy enough, but he knew how to move quietly. He reached the door silently and raised the latch without a sound. The room was in darkness. He saw a shape on the bed, stretched out under a covering. It was that of a girl, and a moonbeam played on a mass of fair hair. A moment later the bed creaked. The brute had leapt on the sleeping child and taken her by the throat. That one creak of the bed was the only sound to escape. Two minutes afterwards the monster left the room. Eon's little friend had drawn her last breath.

About a quarter of an hour afterwards a Frenchman climbed the Palace staircase and he too made his way to the fourth floor. He was a tall, thin man with a lofty and contemptuous expression; it was Beauvallon. He passed the Chancellor's man on the stairs, but neither of them paid any attention to the other. In any case, at that time of day servants of either sex were hurrying backwards and forwards in the passages, carrying steaming samovars in their hands or well-

pressed clothes on their left arms. Beauvallon too, seemed to be quite clear about where he was going. When he reached the third door from the top of the staircase he lightly knocked at it. No answer. He tapped again. Still no answer. Then he knocked more heavily and when there was again no answer he pulled his hat well down over his face, laid his hand on the hilt of his sword and went in.

Like the other, he could see no more in the half-light than a shape stretched out upon the bed. He supposed this must be the man for whom he was looking, and deciding that luck was with him, he drew his sword, meaning to strike without further ado. But when he had taken a step forward and leant over the bed, he saw the mass of fair hair and shook his head. Without question this was a woman. Probably a mistress. She would be able to tell him what he wanted to know.

"Hi! There!" The sleeping woman did not answer. He went nearer and touched her, "Hi! Wake up!" Still she did not move. He shook her, "Well my girl, you sleep heavy!"

No sound. He struck a light. The girl's mouth was half-open, the whites of her eyes were showing. A little blood had trickled from the corner of her mouth. She was dead. In his astonishment, he spoke out loud, "What's all this? A bad business. Have I mistaken the room? That is not my man."

He went out hastily and counted the doors again—one, two, three—there was no doubt it was the third room. But he had not the courage to stay there alongside a corpse and wait for a man who might not come at all. He gave a tug to his hat and left. As he reached the foot of the staircase, close to the outer door, he saw the Chevalier coming towards him, in man's clothes, with his eyes on the ground and obviously preoccupied. He recognized him at once and instinctively laid his hand on his sword. Then he suddenly remembered the corpse and thought to himself, "Why risk a sword thrust when Death is already lying in wait for him up there? A corpse in the Empress's Palace cannot be explained away. Murderer or not, the little man will be hanged." Eon passed without seeing him, and Beauvallon, with a look of hate at his retreating back, lost himself in the night.

Five minutes after this meeting, a struggle took place

between Elizabeth's old nurse and Eon, who was trying to force his way into the imperial bedchamber. Hearing the uproar, in which the nurse's cries predominated, the guard rushed to the scene and Eon was hemmed in by a circle of bayonets when Elizabeth's harsh voice was heard, "Let him come in!"

She was still lying in bed and Schouvalov was sitting upright beside her, in his nightgown, with a mock respectful air which failed to hide the triumphant vanity of the Levantine coxcomb that he was.

The Empress had obviously something wicked ready on the tip of her tongue, some phrase to relieve her desire for revenge, such as "What have you come here for? This is the place for a man, not for a little monstrosity like you . . ."

But Eon, in complete disregard of etiquette, spoke first, in a clipped, broken voice, trembling with grief and rage, "Do you know, Madame," he said, "that while I was here with Your Majesty"—he caught himself up—" . . . at Your Majesty's feet I should say, someone killed Princess Daschkoff, one of your Maids of Honour, in my room?"

"Ha! ha!" laughed Schouvalov, still replete with jam-tarts and Crimean wine, "Ha! ha! Majesty—that's a good one!"

"She was strangled as though by some wild beast," said Eon.

The Empress did not move a muscle, except for a slight quivering of her lips. She looked down at Eon, and at last she said, "A lot of dying seems to go on round you, Beaumont." Then she drew Schouvalov down on to her breast, "Come, Dimitri dear!"

There was nothing to do but to hasten to Voronzov. The old man, when the position had been explained to him in a few breathless words, gave a shiver of horror.

"Chevalier," he said, "I have never known anything the least like this to happen in the Palace. It may be that the Chancellor will be interested in keeping it quiet. And perhaps the Empress will too," he added after a moment. "That is your only hope of safety."

The Chevalier gave him two letters which he had just written in the waiting-room; one was a short report in the agreed terms to the Prince de Conti, the other a message of

farewell to Mme de Rochefort. He begged the Count to see that they reached their destinations.

"I promise you that," said Voronzov in a grave voice.

He considered for a few moments with his head sunk on his chest; then, lifting it with obvious effort, he said, "Go off to Schlussembourg, since that is where you were going, anyhow. Pray God to protect you, and whatever happens, look upon these letters as your last will and testament."

## CHAPTER XIV

# The Russian Bastille

LYING BACK IN the sleigh in which he was travelling to Schlus-selbourg, Eon thought over his position. He was worried by the fact that the Imperial letters he carried had come to him from the Chancellor's office. This must mean that Bestoucheff knew all about the business, and indeed he could hardly help doing so, since the police were under his orders. The nearer Eon got to Lake Ladoga the more apprehensive he felt, particularly when he thought of Bragard and Heart's Delight, who were riding behind, like himself well muffled up in furs. Eon had brought them by agreement with Voronzov, partly as a protection against untoward meetings on the road and partly from fear that he might find Valcroissant ill and difficult to move. Now he wondered if he had been unwise and might be leading the two honest fellows into a death-trap.

Schlus-selbourg is about thirty miles from St. Petersburg; the party would arrive there just as it was getting dark. At lunch-time they stopped in a small village where there was a primitive inn which served as a halting-place for soldiers and prisoners travelling between the capital and the fortress. As soon as he had found a seat by the stove in the main room, Eon took out his papers, which he had not had time to examine carefully in the morning. Both letters were signed by Elizabeth. One of them merely gave orders to set Valcroissant free. It was written in Russian and had been sealed in his presence by one of the Empress's secretaries, who had previously read it over to him. But what about the other? That had been handed to him, already sealed, by Bestoucheff's secretary. Like the first, it was addressed to the Governor. Eon did not feel at all easy in his mind about this second letter. Supposing it contained an order directed against his own safety? Then it struck him that the first letter was really all he needed. It contained the Empress's

direct order to release Valcroissant, so what necessity was there for a letter from Bestoucheff to the Governor? Either it was merely a letter of introduction, and the Chevalier could get along without it, or it might be a warning—perhaps a hint to disregard the order, or to hold things up for a time, or to hand over merely Valcroissant's dead body. The more Eon thought it over the more convinced he was that he ought to find out for his own protection what was in this official letter. They would be starting off again very soon, and it would be too late. With the utmost care, he slipped the point of his knife under the three seals and managed to lift them without breaking them and so to open the letter. It was written in German on the official paper of the Chancellery. Neither Eon nor Heart's Delight knew a word of the language, but Bragard, who had served in the Royal German regiment, knew enough to read the letter, which the Bear had written in very clear, well-formed handwriting above the Imperial signature. Bragard, without any hesitation, read aloud: "After observing all the correct procedure and showing him round the fortress, you are to possess yourself of the person of the bearer of this order, and make certain that, while no attempt is made on his life, he is never heard of again."

"Monsieur," said Bragard, "the person referred to is you!"

"Yes," said Heart's Delight, "and if you'll excuse my saying so, you are bearing your own death-warrant."

Eon listened without flickering an eyelid; as always in moments of crisis, he was perfectly calm. Turning to Heart's Delight he ordered, "Get a bit of sealing wax."

A few seconds later—for Heart's Delight knew many trades—the letter was re-sealed. Just then there was a noise of bells outside and a man came in and looked hastily round the room. He appeared to be a German trader; both his wig and his beard were red. He sat down in a corner of the room and shouted peremptorily for food. But Eon recognized the man's wall-eyes.

The newcomer seemed to be in a great hurry; he crammed his food into his mouth, and as soon as he had finished he came over and introduced himself, speaking in bad German. He had been told, he said, that the gentlemen were on their way to Schlusselfburg; he was going there too, and it was a miserable



journey. He wondered if the gentlemen were armed—he thought it was always advisable to carry arms as a protection against wolves, in case of an accident on the road. He himself carried a shotgun.

Eon let him talk and Bragard translated his twaddle as best he could. When he had finished, the Chevalier got up and called Heart's Delight. As they went away he gave Bragard a kick under the table and then threw the letter of introduction to him and said aloud, "This letter is of no use to us. You had better burn it." With that they went off to look at the horses.

Immediately afterwards Beauvallon pulled out his purse and casually counted out ten gold roubles which he pushed towards Bragard, saying, "What do you think of that, my friend?"

This time he spoke French. Now Bragard, though the ups and downs of a life of adventure had reduced him for the moment to the position of a lackey, was a man of superior intelligence, who had once been the pupil of distinguished ecclesiastics at the Royal College of Aix-en-Provence, and he was far too subtle to show the slightest sign of suspicion. At the sight of the gold pieces he opened his eyes very wide, and said ingenuously, "It's a lot of money."

"It is yours," said the other man, "if you want it. Your master said that this letter was no good to him. But it looks to me as if it bore the great seal."

Bragard explained, like the simple, good-natured fool he was supposed to be, "It is a letter of introduction to the Governor of the fortress, which was given my master by the Chancellery. But it doesn't mention his name, and the other, which he has in his hand, does. So he has no need of this one."

"Very well then; give it to me!"

"Give it to you?" Bragard scratched his head, "but I promised to burn it."

"Well, you can throw any piece of paper into the stove."

Bragard seemed to be torn by indecision; he kept looking furtively at the door and then back again at the money. The stranger, with a sigh, added another five gold roubles to the little heap. "That should be enough, I think," he said.

Bragard made a gesture of surrender, pocketed the money and handed over the letter.

"Good!" said the other. "Not a word to anyone."

Next moment Eon came back with Heart's Delight at his heels and behind them the driver clapping his hands and bawling, "Come along, gentlemen, come along. The days are short in winter."

The travellers did not understand what he said, but his gestures were obvious, and without delay they got into the sleigh and wrapped themselves up in their furs, while Bragard winked secretly at Eon.

"We shall get there before nightfall," said Eon. "We must, because of the wolves."

"At the moment," answered Bragard, "the only one is behind us, Monsieur, and I should hate to be in his skin."

Schlussembourg is a fortress on the bank of Lake Ladoga, and the foot of its walls is washed by the water. The entrance is through a postern at the end of a drawbridge which is covered by a cannon on either side. Once inside, there is only one building for everybody and everything except the prisoners; this is the Governor's house built with its back to the wall, with a little garden in front of it. This garden is also a cemetery, and in it are buried higgledy-piggledy all those who die within the walls, prisoners, warders, soldiers and the Governors themselves. Beside the house is the chapel, whose green minarets are not high enough to be seen over the battlements. In the thickness of the outer wall are the cells which all open on a passage which encircles a narrow courtyard planted with stunted trees.

The Governor was waiting for the travellers at the end of the drawbridge. Eon studied his face. It was a soldier's face, straightforward and determined. This man was the nephew by marriage of the famous Lestocq who had played so great a part in the accession of Elizabeth to the throne. His uncle, whose name he had taken, had helped him in his career until he got this job, which was of no little importance, for Schlussembourg was considered to be the Bastille of Russia.

He received his visitors with civility and in Eon's presence in his study he opened the letter which the Chevalier handed to him. He did so with every mark of respect and Eon was not surprised to see him carry it to his lips. But as soon as he had

read it he burst out, "Oh, how unfortunate! How terribly unfortunate! M. de Valcroissant is dead, Monsieur; he died six months ago." He paused for a moment at a loss for words. "Believe me, please believe me, I am heart-broken."

Eon had had a shock, but he regained his usual self-control at once.

The Governor went on, "You do believe me, Monsieur, don't you? In any case, please come with me . . ."

He got up and went out quickly into the garden. There, among scattered heaps of snow which marked the place of withered flowers, were several crosses. Against the wall was a row of tombstones in porphyry or black marble.

"Here lie my predecessors," said the Governor, pointing to them. "There is a place kept for me just next door. And here is where we buried M. de Valcroissant." He showed Eon a wooden cross on which a fleur-de-lys had been carved with a knife. "I had no authority to put his name on it," he said.

Just then they saw Beauvallon at the gate of the cemetery. He had been following them at a distance and seemed to be rather embarrassed. The Governor asked in a surprised voice, "Is this man part of your following, Monsieur?"

"No," said Eon, "but he has a letter for you. Read it and you will know as much as I do." Then he added with a smile, "I know the position."

The Governor opened and read the second letter; he put it quickly in his pocket with a slight smile and then said, in a quizzical tone, "Gentlemen, let us go to dinner. To-morrow we may be dining with Pluto."

Next morning at seven o'clock, just as day was breaking, Eon came quietly down from his room and found the Governor waiting for him at the door. "In order to make things easier," said the Governor, "I shall be glad if you, Monsieur, will do whatever I ask you."

Eon bowed, and just then Beauvallon appeared, talking his usual gibberish and looking at the Chevalier with a mixture of hatred and triumph. The Governor addressed them both, "In order that one or other of you," he said, "may be able to report to my Gracious Sovereign and"—turning to Beauvallon—"to

the Grand Duchess, whose candied fruits are delicious, I propose to show you how I look after the prisoners entrusted to me."

Thereupon he set off on the rounds. The party was headed by a warder with a huge bunch of keys in his hand. Behind them were two soldiers with loaded muskets.

"There are two kinds of cells here," said the Governor, "those which are above the level of the lake, just as my house and the chapel are, and those which are below it. Let's see the higher ones first."

They passed four doors, and at the fifth the Governor stopped. "Here we are," he said. "Here is an empty cell."

The cell was dimly lighted by a narrow opening in the thick wall, two feet wide on the inside and about six inches on the outside, guarded by three rows of iron cross-bars. There was a straw mattress in the corner, neatly rolled up and put aside when not in use, with a rug beside it. The only other furniture was a stool, which was chained to a ring in the wall, presumably in order that the prisoner might not be tempted to throw it at his gaoler's head. There was a second ring in the wall with a chain which had at its other end an iron which appeared to be intended for securing the ankle of the occupant.

"Could there be more agreeable surroundings in which to purge one's sins?" asked the Governor.

A little further on they passed through another door and went down a flight of some twenty steps.

"Here we are below the level of the lake," said the Governor, "at least during the period of the thaw which, by the way, is just beginning now. Here is the cell which M. de Valcroissant occupied. Of course, he was removed from it when there was a danger of drowning, and then he was brought back again a little later. This is where he died."

Beauvallon had come close to them; he was listening intently and had a sneer on his face. Eon had to use all his self-control to avoid seizing him by the throat. The cell which the warder had opened was like the one on the upper level, but infinitely more damp and even darker. The silence was absolute. A few remnants of a straw mattress were scattered over a wooden plank in the corner. There was neither table nor stool, Eon

tried to imagine the sufferings which Valcroissant must have endured, and he thought that it is not always a happy thing to be the messenger of the King of France.

"When the shutters on the window are closed and the door is shut," remarked the Governor, "one feels just as if one was buried alive. You can see for yourselves."

The warder closed the shutter, and at the Governor's suggestion Eon went inside; then everyone else withdrew, the door was bolted and he was left in the silence. The last thing he heard was a harsh laugh; Beauvallon was venting his pleasure. "What a fool I am," thought Eon as he heard it. "Suppose they have trapped me. God knows, if they have, I have certainly deserved it. They may go up again and leave me here to rot." As the minutes passed he forced himself to tell the seconds one by one, until by the end of what he made out to be five minutes, he could no longer count or think, but just stood holding his head in his hands. He never knew how long this horror lasted; probably about ten minutes. Then suddenly the bolt was drawn back, the door opened and the Governor appeared.

"Well, Monsieur, what do you think of that?"

"My God!" said Eon, "I would rather have my head cut off!"

The Governor laughed. "My dear sir, you have no idea what men can put up with. I have known several who have lasted day after day in this frozen darkness."

He turned to Beauvallon and said to him in German, "Your turn now, Monsieur."

Beauvallon's face turned a greenish hue. When he saw the door shut on Eon he had been filled with unholy joy, but when the Chevalier came out again into the light of day, he looked anxiously and most unhappily at the Governor. And now the Governor was urging him to go in.

Lestocq's expression was perfectly composed. His thick soldier's lips wore their unchangeable smile. Eon did not seem to notice him. Beauvallon's pride forbade him to refuse, and though his lips were quivering, he kept control of himself and, turning a look of contempt on the Chevalier, he forced himself with shaking knees to enter the cell. For the second time the door was shut and the bolts shot home.

"That's all over," said the Governor. "As I told you, the thaw is just beginning. In two days the cell will be full of water, and so Her Majesty's command will be obeyed."

Eon bowed, "Monsieur," he said, "Her Majesty has no better servant than yourself."

## CHAPTER XV

# To the Frontier or Death

ON THE EVENING of the same day, about nightfall, Voronzov saw Eon and his two servants arrive, looking like dogs after a day's sport, muddled up to the eyes. The Chevalier carried a dispatch from Lestocq informing the Chancellor that his orders had been carried out, which Voronzov arranged should be delivered in the early morning by an unknown man, who then merely handed it to the porter and made off at once, so that neither Bestoucheff nor the Grand Duchess knew anything until the next day, when, furthermore, they had no details.

Eon made a brief report. His stratagem filled the Count with admiration. "Was the lake rising?" he asked.

"It was just trickling over the loophole," said Eon. "If Beauvallon has not already been drowned like a rat, he will be to-night. I would have preferred to kill him in some other way."

Voronzov shrugged his shoulders. "You already did him a great honour, Chevalier, when you crossed swords with him in Paris. Now that he is drowned and the wolves have eaten Hautfort, we have two less to deal with. There is still the Bear, whom the Chancellor was silly enough (as even the cleverest are at times) to have flogged, but who unhappily for you and me survived two hundred lashes. And then there is the Walberg, whom I had sent to Siberia without anyone knowing it, but who was sent back before she had even crossed the Urals, owing to the indiscretion of some idiot of a policeman."

Then he pulled a letter from his pocket and read it to Eon. It was written by the Empress with her own hand to Louis XV. In it she assured the King of France of her feelings of regard towards him and begged him to send to her without any delay a plenipotentiary with a treaty of alliance ready drawn up for her to sign. At the same time she promised to destroy the text of her treaty with England.

"That is the main point," said Voronzov. "And I can tell

you that Austria and France have drawn closer together and that the Empress of Austria, at the instigation of Kaunitz, has written to Mme de Pompadour, addressing her as 'my dear friend,' which, as you will realize, is a great thing. The whole balance of power in Europe is changing, and you will play a decisive part in this important process by bringing our two Courts together. It means peace, a peace achieved by the crushing of the King of Prussia, the reduction of England to helplessness, and the domination of Europe by the other three powers." He sighed. "It also means the ruin of the Chancellor," he went on. "Once the alliance is signed I shall replace him. The influence of the Grand Duchess and her husband will immediately come to an end. We may even be able to send her home to her own country. There is a way by which we could do this. You should know—and I am showing my complete trust in you by telling you this—that Her Gracious Majesty has had eight children: generally speaking, they have been brought up in the country as officers and gentlemen. But it happened that on one occasion the Empress and the Grand Duchess each gave birth to a child within two days of one another, and the police were instructed to exchange the respective children. The Grand Duchess's child went to the country in the normal way, and it will be lost sooner or later somewhere in the depths of Russia. But the one which was really the Empress's is passed off as being that of the Grand Duchess, and she hates him. All the same, the fact remains that this child will one day be Tsar, and that the Empress frankly considers the two who are officially his parents as usurpers. There would be no difficulty in accusing the Grand Duke of conspiracy and putting him in prison. Or it might be simpler to denounce the acknowledged liaison between the Grand Duchess (who is, of course, the leader of the two) and Prince Poniatowski. Then, once she had been convicted and banished, it would be quite easy to deal with her husband."

Eon listened in silence as Voronzov explained his idea, which would very possibly determine the future of Russia for fifty years to come.

"To-morrow," added Voronzov, "the Chancellor will know that a prisoner has been drowned at Schlusselfbourg and he



will think it was you. It will be another day before he discovers—and what a discovery that will be—that it was really Beauvallon. Everything will come out then, especially as the Empress is not at all good at keeping a secret. So the hue and cry for you will start the day after to-morrow, though it may be before that, for the Walberg is here, and I could not swear that she doesn't keep my palace under observation."

He hesitated; then went on: "If you succeed, I shall govern the Empire. If you fail, it means death for you and Siberia—which is much the same thing—for me!"

Voronzov spoke slowly and with a dramatic intensity. Eon suddenly saw this old man, sitting at his table between two candles, as a man balanced between Power and Death. His thin fingers toyed with a ring in which a blue diamond sparkled. His face was completely impassive, but his eyes twinkled amiably and sceptically through the mask. Eon felt deep admiration for the man's cold courage. He was moved by instinct to throw himself on his knees and kiss the old man's hands as he might have done those of his father. Voronzov felt the impact of this wave of affectionate admiration, and the impression it made on him was so profound that he in turn was for a moment overcome. His eyes moistened, but so firm was his restraint that no tear fell on his cheeks. He recovered himself and said, "Diplomacy is a woman, and you, Chevalier, may win her favour."

Then he opened a drawer and took out several packets of gold coins. "For the journey," he explained. "Don't spare any expense." And, waving Eon away with a rather melancholy gesture, he said, "Goodbye. You carry my future in your hands."

A troika is a light carriage in which it is possible to travel fast, but in travelling across Russia one has always to reckon with the idle habits and general indifference of the people and possibility of mishaps on the road. The distance to the Lithuanian frontier was four hundred miles or so, which in fine weather, over dry ground or snow, should take ten days. But now the thaw had set in, water poured down the roads and covered them with thick mud. It was impossible to do even the customary number of miles a day, for in many places the horses could not go beyond a walk, and that only with great help from

the drivers. Halfway through the third stage of the journey the mud became so bad that the travellers had to spend the night in a chance lodging, and took two days to do what they had expected to do in one.

That same day another troika caught up the three Frenchmen and passed them. They could not see the faces of the occupants, who were asleep under their rugs. At the posting station at Louga, Bragard rushed off to see what he could find out; as he rejoined Eon a pistol shot was fired from some hiding-place and the bullet only just missed the Chevalier. They searched the place at once with their swords in their hands, but whoever fired the shot had withdrawn into the shadows. Just then Heart's Delight joined them and reported that after watching for a long time at the door of his room he had recognized the Walberg by a tune which he had heard her humming. And after that in the downstairs room he had found everyone expressing astonishment at the size and shape of one of the newcomers and at his huge woolly head; it was obvious that they were talking about the fellow who had made a determined attempt with the Baroness soon after they arrived at Peterhof to kidnap Eon. These people too spoke of the man as the Bear—a name which his appearance seemed everywhere to invite.

"So he is well again," said Eon, "or else he is going about with his back raw." For everybody knew what Bestoucheff's floggings were like. "Any ordinary man would be in his grave. The fellow must really be a bear to be still alive. However, you know now with whom we have to reckon. There are only two of them left, but those two are working as a couple—and what a couple! Brute force and treachery combined—the Bear and the Serpent."

For the next few stages Eon and his servants were always a few hours behind the others, but on the sixth day they were delighted to see them sunk in the mud and so to get to Ostrov before them. But the next morning, when they had hoped to be able to get the start, their coachman did not turn up, and they found him stretched out on the straw in the stable in a deep sleep from which Bragard was unable to rouse him even by kicking him hard. "Drunk as the coachman that he is," said Bragard in disgust. Heart's Delight threw a glass of water in

the man's face, but that too was useless. "H'm," said Eon as he listened to the sounds of the others getting ready to leave. "They have given him something queer to drink. That is no natural sleep."

The three men themselves got the horses out of the stable and harnessed them to the troika. Then they threw the coachman into it like a bundle and Bragard took the reins. But as he did not know either the horses or the road, they lost time which even the coachman, who finally came to about midday, swearing that he had drunk no more than his usual glass of vodka, was unable to make up. As a result they did not get to the next halt until so late that they found nothing left in the big dining-room except dirty plates. The same thing happened again the next day at Dvinsk, where it was even more infuriating to find that the Bear and the Baroness had eaten all the good food and nothing was left for the Chevalier and his servants except a bowl of cabbage soup and some porridge. On the evening of the ninth day they reached Polti; the enemy had just gone to bed, having taken two out of the three available rooms in the only inn in the village. It was agreed that they should not leave the coachman alone and that they would give him his vodka with their own hands. Night had fallen; the occasional sounds of conversation had gradually died away and nothing broke the silence except the barking of dogs, a loud noise of someone snoring and the monotonous stamping of a horse in the stables.

The Chevalier and Heart's Delight, bundled up in their cloaks, listened in silence to these sounds in the night. Suddenly Bragard joined them. "There's something up," he said. "Those two don't seem to be getting on together. The woman has been insulting the Bear in a way I have hardly ever heard a man insulted by a woman. They are talking German, and I know the bad words well enough."

"There may be good reason for them to quarrel," said Eon. "We are at the last halt before the frontier post of Sviet-Petka. By the evening of the day after to-morrow we shall be safe. Our passports are in order and Voronzov's signature means something. I quite realize that one of those two, or perhaps both of them, may have an order from Bestoucheff to stop us. But what I propose to do the day after to-morrow is to let

them start first in the morning, and then to abandon our troika and take the three horses and strike off either to the right or the left so as to cross the frontier at a place where they will not see us. I imagine they suspect this and have decided that the idea of getting us arrested at the frontier won't work. Murder is a much surer way, especially as you two will be left here and the murderer will be able to steal the documents I am carrying, of whose existence they must be aware. So, as far as I can see they will either try to murder me to-night or to-morrow night, or possibly they will attack us on the road."

Bragard was astonished. "What, Monsieur, the two of them—and one a woman at that—against us three?"

"They may hire people to help them. The stakes are high, and it's not likely that Bestoucheff has failed to supply them with money."

Bragard nodded: "As far as I could make out," said this highly intelligent fellow, "she was telling him that he was an ignorant fool. I think his idea was simply to attack us at some suitable place in the woods, and that she, knowing us as she does, thought that a very rash thing to do."

The Chevalier smiled. "She is certainly right there. But the fact that she is in a temper shows that she has no really satisfactory plan of her own. They realize that time is running short and they are beginning to lose their heads."

Eon stopped talking and began once more to think over the incidents of the journey. Each of the first eight stages had been marked by an attempt at murder. At Louga the waiter in the inn had looked so furtive when he poured out Eon's drink that the Chevalier had become suspicious and told him to drink it himself, whereupon the man had knocked over the glass as though by accident. Then at Ostrov there had been the pistol-shot. And the next day, in the pitch darkness of a filthy night, Eon had had a glimpse of someone coming towards him and then felt a blow. Afterwards he found a hole in his furs made by a dagger; fortunately, it had gone no deeper. The same night a shot had been fired through his window. Could all these be accidents? There are people who play the fool with shot-guns or with pistols; some let their daggers stick out carelessly from their pockets; and there are even waiters who upset glasses

without doing it on purpose because they have been told to drink the beer themselves. But what about the troika which turned over so strangely? Or the horse which cast a shoe so far away from all help? Or the coachman put to sleep by drugging his drink? It would be a queer thing if all these were accidents!

Night had now fallen. Out in the courtyard they heard the slow steps of a heavy man; suddenly the steps ceased, as though the man was watching and listening.

"That's the Bear spying on us," said Eon. The two servants wanted to rush out after him, but Eon seized them by the arm and stopped them. "Listen to me carefully," he said. "The moment has come to risk everything at one throw." He drew them both close to him and laid down his plan of campaign in a low voice.

There were two beds in the Chevalier's room, so Bragard was able to sleep in as good a bed as his master. His was on the left as you went in; the Chevalier had chosen the one on the right, and the hotel-keeper was aware of this. The Walberg and the Bear had rooms on the other side of the landing. The doors of the rooms were only secured by a latch. The innkeeper and his staff slept by the stove in the Russian manner, and Heart's Delight and the coachman were with them. By ten o'clock, above and below stairs, all seemed snoring. Eon stayed alone in his room for some time until Bragard came in.

"Let's get on with it," Eon said to him. Thereupon they began a violent argument, and in a moment Heart's Delight rushed up the stairs, taking them two at a time, and discordantly joined in. This comedy proceeded until the two servants began to groan as if they had been knocked about and thrown out on to the landing. Then followed a stream of abuse from Eon, who shouted, "And if you want to leave me, you ruffians, you needn't think I've any use for you. You can go to the Devil."

While all this was going on, the door opposite was gently pushed ajar. "Good!" said Eon to himself. "The lady finds us interesting."

A little later Eon heard the tune of the Royal Guards' March whistled in the courtyard, which told him that the Bear had sought out Heart's Delight in the stables and made definite proposals to him. Thirty golden roubles had changed hands and

the Bear had accepted in every detail the plan which Heart's Delight suggested.

A little later still, Bragard slipped into Eon's room as quietly as a snake. "The trap is set," he said. "I swore to the woman that I was going to sleep by the stove, that you would be alone in your room, and that you slept like a log, especially in the early morning. She will come and get into your bed, which she will think is mine; she will lie down in the dark and keep quiet until you have gone off to sleep. Then when she thinks you are sound asleep she will cut your throat with a very sharp little instrument which she showed me. Naturally, I said every bad thing I could think of about you. I am sure you will forgive me for bringing the vixen into your room." He tossed a purse from one hand to the other and disappeared.

Eon blew out the light, got into Bragard's bed and waited. An hour went by and then he heard a footstep in the room. "Is that you, Bragard?" he asked in a sleepy voice, turning towards the wall. Bragard grunted and Eon guessed that the servant was guiding the Walberg in her bare feet across the room to the other bed. "So far, so good," he said to himself, keeping his breathing regular. "I must keep an eye open in case she tries to hurry things. All this does credit to our ingenuity. Now we must hope that the other one will hurry up."

Eon had to wait nearly another hour, during which he tossed and turned every now and then and coughed like a man who could not get to sleep. Then suddenly there was a heavy step on the landing. Someone came in and went straight to Eon's bed, where the Walberg was. Eon imagined the woman lying stretched out and motionless. She thought no doubt that it was Bragard who had come back to make an arrangement with her or to advise her to hurry up. Then there was a grunt like a blacksmith makes when he swings his hammer and the sound of something soft being squashed. There was no cry from the bed. Then the man went away and the stairs creaked again under his heavy tread. Eon waited a few seconds, then got up and struck a light. The two servants were already in the room. Eon lifted the candle. "By the guts of the hangman I cheated," said Heart's Delight, "there's been no mistake about this execution!"

The Walberg was stretched out with her skull battered in. The pillow was covered with blood.

"That was done with a log of wood, or a fire-iron," said Bragard, and he added, "Monsieur, this woman is very dead indeed and what is more we have had nothing to do with it, which puts us at our ease before God!"

Eon did not answer him, but he began to laugh quietly, "That makes three of them," he said.

## CHAPTER XVI

# The Bear Hunt

ONE PERSON WHO got a severe shock next morning was the innkeeper. He had just woken up and, after yawning till he nearly dislocated his jaw, was throwing down his first customary glass of vodka when Eon confronted him.

"My word, mine host," he said, "people get killed in your house, it seems."

Not understanding French the man stood looking stupidly at Eon with his cap in his hand as is fitting in the presence of one who wears a sword. The Chevalier dragged him to the room where the Walberg's corpse was lying, and Bragard, the linguist, jabbered enough Russian to make him understand that this was the work of the Bear.

"The Bear!" repeated the innkeeper, and the very words were enough to put him into a rage. The Bear took a pleasure in behaving brutally, and on the previous evening he had allowed himself the satisfaction of throwing the host down his own stairs. The man had picked up his cap and sworn bitterly at his persecutor, but having taken a look at the Bear's hairy bulk he had done no more. All the same he had slept on his grievance, and he had not had a good night. So now he repeated "The Bear!" with some bitterness.

A moment later the room filled and all stood gazing at the corpse with blood and brains oozing out from the split and battered skull. Hearing the noise, the Bear appeared, treading as heavily as ever, and at the sight of him the others fell silent as people fall silent in the classic tragedies when they see a person on whom has fallen the hand of the gods. His eyes were blazing, but his face was ashen, and he hooked his hands into his belt so that they could not be seen shaking. It was curious to see how the circle grew wider around him; with his great head rolling slowly from side to side he still frightened the life out of them all. He even had the devilish nerve to start smiling



at them, but the smile suddenly froze on his lips when he saw Eon. He could not make up his mind whether he had missed his mark or whether the Chevalier had come to life again.

"My God!" he said. Then he turned towards the bed, and, recognizing his late companion, he began to curse. Eon laughed and pointed his pistols at the man, "You ruffian!" he began—and then suddenly with incredible speed the Bear turned and leapt at the crowd, knocked over Eon and the innkeeper and all in his way and rushed down the stairs at breakneck speed.

"Shoot him, Monsieur! Shoot him!" cried Bragard. But the man had reached the ground floor before Eon managed to extricate himself from the confusion. He fired at random and the bullet buried itself in the framework of the door. The fugitive leapt on one of the two troikas which was already in front of the door, threw the coachman off the box and seized the reins. The horses were bucking in the shafts, ready to go off at a gallop. Eon fired a second time. "Missed again!" he muttered, stamping his foot.

The bullet must have grazed the Bear's neck, for he shook his head like a man who has been stung by a wasp. But at the same moment he laid his whip across the backs of the three horses and the vehicle went off like a flash of lightning.

The next step was to go through the effects of the dead woman and her vanished companion. It was agreed that the Walberg's clothes and rugs should be handed over to the hostess. As for the papers, seeing that no one else was able to read, much less to understand them, Eon agreed out of pure goodness of heart to take charge of them. Then over an ample breakfast washed down with generous draughts it was decided that the hostess should be left to bury La Walberg, while Eon should set off with the innkeeper and the coachman for the frontier post in order to lay the whole matter before the chief officer of the district, one Colonel Popoff, to whom no doubt the Bear was at that moment hastening to make a false report.

Eon was greatly relieved by the woman's death and even more by the discovery of her papers. Neither he nor either of the servants could read them, but he felt certain that among them was an order signed by Bestoucheff—and sure enough he found it; there was no difficulty in making out the Chancellor's

signature as well as the name "de Beaumont." No doubt it was an order to detain a young Frenchman looking like a girl and bring him back to St. Petersburg. Eon laughed to himself at the droll twist of his adventure, and when the hostess's back was turned he took the precaution of throwing the papers into the stove.

When he got back to his room, his mind still running on papers, Eon instinctively put a hand to his chest and then turned pale. "I have been robbed in the night," he muttered.

Suddenly the whole thing came back to him. He realized that although when the Walberg first got into the other bed he was wide awake and ready for anything, there was a possibility that he might have dozed off for a few minutes in the hour that followed. He even had a vague memory of having felt a light touch on his chest. No doubt the woman had stolen his wallet and had been on the point of cutting his throat when she had been frightened by the sound of a step on the staircase. Or possibly she might have intended to make off with the stolen wallet and leave him alone. In either case she must have thrown herself on the bed again and lain without moving when the Bear came in. Had the Bear in his turn, after killing the woman, taken the wallet, which she was probably clutching in her hand, or was it possible that in the first moments of confusion the innkeeper or one of his helpers had robbed the body? It seemed to Eon that the speed with which the man had set off for the frontier post showed that he felt himself in a strong position. He was on his way with the wallet and the Empress's letter in his hand to this Colonel Popoff, from whom Eon felt that he had everything to fear. Terrible pictures of despair and defeat passed through the Chevalier's mind. The whole object of his journey was lost and there was nothing to hope for any longer at Versailles, and nothing at St. Petersburg where he would probably meet his death at the hands of Bestoucheff and the Grand Duchess, after having to face the contempt of the Empress and Voronzov.

If the situation was to be saved there was not a moment to be lost. In spite of their vigorous protests, Eon decided, in order to save as much weight as possible, to leave his two faithful servants behind and to take with him only the innkeeper and

the coachman. He loaded on to the troika the bloodstained iron instrument, which had been discovered in the bedroom of the Bear, as evidence of the crime. To console the disconsolate servants, he said that he was convinced that the Bear would miss the road to Sviet Petka and that he would certainly be found one of these days frozen to death in the surrounding country. Actually he expected to be able to catch him up and kill him. They would be three to one, and the Bear was unarmed. It would be an old-fashioned hunt to the death, in which the animal with no resources but those of an animal would be destroyed by the man with his superior equipment.

The Bear was an hour ahead of them when they started. The coachman pushed his horses and Eon and the innkeeper kept a sharp lookout ahead of them. The country between Polti and Sviet Petka is flat and rather swampy, especially during the thaw. They wasted a lot of time avoiding great holes full of mud in which the horses would have sunk up to their bellies. The view ahead was constantly interrupted by clumps of trees, mostly stunted birches which seemed to be shivering in the cold Spring wind. Eon was very much worried lest their quarry should take cover in one of these clumps and so escape them altogether. Certainly in that case Eon would easily have been able to cross the frontier, always provided that the Bear did not come up behind him, while the necessary formalities were being carried out, but he would have lost his precious papers. However, the fugitive evidently had no intention of hiding. The track of his wheels was quite clearly marked in the mud and the innkeeper kept on repeating, "He is ahead of us!"

Towards midday the road became worse and worse. The horses could only get along at walking pace, and that by a struggle. They stopped a moment to give them some food and Eon threw a few glasses of vodka on to their corn. After this there was great difficulty in getting them to start again; they reared and jostled one another, while the coachman swore and lashed them violently with his whip. Finally, they started off like mad things; the troika rocked from side to side and threw up a great stream of water and mud over everything, while the travellers hung on to the doorposts to avoid being thrown out. And so they went ahead in great style for a large

part of the afternoon, galloping whenever the state of the ground made it possible, while Eon wondered how the devil their quarry managed to keep ahead of them.

Just as twilight was falling the coachman gave a shout and pointed with his whip. At the end of the stretch of road in front of them they saw a carriage which was going along slowly with a big man on the box.

"We have him at last!" cried Eon. "Faster! Faster!"

The coachman gave a wild whistle which roused the exhausted horses to fresh efforts. For a few minutes Eon was filled with a sense of triumph. He stood up in the troika and fixed his eyes on the Bear, who had realized his danger and was lashing his beasts. Eon thought that at last he would be able to settle his account with him, once and for all. His only anxiety was that night might fall before they had caught him up, although the distance between them was growing less every minute. But suddenly the coachman gave another shout, and began to swear bitterly.

"What?" asked Eon, "What is it?"

The man stretched out his arm and pointed to the rooftop of a house in the distance—the first house of Sviet-Petka. They were only two miles from the post. Eon sank back into his seat, overcome with disappointment. "Too late!" he groaned.

It was no good pushing the horses any more. With a quarter of an hour's lead, the Bear had won the race. The Chevalier was worried at the thought that the man would be safe once he reached the village, and also that he would have the first chance to talk to Colonel Popoff. Eon knew that the Colonel was an old officer of the St. Petersburg guard, who had created so much scandal by his reckless and debauched life that he had been sent to the frontier in disgrace and was now seething with rage in his lonely exile.

Night was falling fast, and it was dark before they reached the village. Soon the lights began to twinkle and they could hear horses stamping and children crying. In the middle of the village a big fire was burning, against which they could see the silhouettes of the encircling soldiers. Eon pushed on boldly to the post itself. But when he got to the door he saw Colonel Popoff sitting at a table in the large room with a glass and some

papers in front of him, while the Bear was standing facing him, apparently answering his questions. On the table between the two men, with its ribbons still tied, was the little leather wallet which Princess Daschkoff had given Eon just before her death, and in which was the letter to the King of France, signed by the Empress with her own hand.

When the Colonel saw Eon he frowned, made a gesture indicating that he must wait his turn, and banged the door in the rudest way. A few minutes later Eon was taken with his luggage to the priest's hovel by the sergeant of the guard. There he shut himself up. After two hours the innkeeper, sent by Popoff to find him, opened the door and stood agape at what he saw. Gently he shut the door and rushed off, stumbling through the mud, to the Colonel's office. "Good!" said Eon to himself. "He will tell the Colonel that instead of the Chevalier he found a lady here. And I must say that considering I have had no lady's maid to help me and not even a looking-glass, I am passably well turned out. The gentleman will be astonished and with good reason, and if he doesn't come and have a look at me after that I shall despair for Russian officers and their lack of human curiosity!" Sure enough within five minutes he heard a new and lighter step, the door burst open and the Colonel appeared.

"I didn't know . . ." he stammered. "I wasn't expecting . . ."

He was dumbfounded by this vision at the centre of a hovel with a dingy curtain for background. The woman he saw sitting on a dirty bench with her little feet just visible under her petticoat was the same woman who had shone in all her glory at the Court ball in the presence of the Empress. All his memories of St. Petersburg came flooding back into the Colonel's mind; he rushed out of the room, snatched up a stool, an old cloak and a candlestick out of the priest's hands and in a harsh voice ordered the whole family out of the house into the muddy road. Then he came back with his hat under his arm, bowing from the waist and clicking his heels as he had been accustomed to do in the old days.

"Colonel Popoff," he introduced himself.

"I am most happy to meet you, Colonel."

Popoff bowed again and put down the stool. "Please take

this seat, Madame. You will be more comfortable than on that wretched bench."

Eon obeyed with a smile, but when he pressed the Colonel to take the bench, Popoff stubbornly refused. He busied himself officiously with the resin torch, which he stuck in the candlestick, and spread the cloak under the Chevalier's feet, all the while uttering a mixture of snorts of rage and languishing sighs.

"Forget the name which you will see on my passport," said Eon, "and let me present myself as Mlle Léa de Beaumont, reader to Her Majesty the Empress."

Popoff bowed more profoundly than ever.

"You will realize that I have had the privilege of seeing Her Majesty every day and of meeting the most important of her servants. And in this connection, Colonel, I would like to tell you that I have heard a great deal about you from Count Voronzov."

Popoff blushed and his eyes lit up. "Really? How glad I am to think that the Count . . ."

"I have heard about the misdeeds of which enemies have accused you. They were what the Count, in his inimitable way which you will remember, called a young man's wild oats."

"Oh! the Count said that? How exquisitely kind! A young man's wild oats! How well he—and you too, Madame, how well you both understand human nature. Yes, Madame, human nature . . . wild oats." He raised his voice, clicked his heels and uplifted his hand. "But I am, and dare to say that I always have been, a loyal subject."

"You are much better thought of at Court than you seem to believe, Colonel. It is rumoured that you have given way to despair, even that you have bemoaned your fate in public; your best friends have felt that such behaviour is not worthy of you. It is true that you have been punished, but only as a mother punishes her child."

Tears came to Popoff's eyes. "Yes, yes, that's it . . . a mother. The Empress is my mother, the mother of us all. I bless the hand which struck me!" He crossed himself. "I would die for her if I could. Ah, Madame, if only I could give my life, my poor life . . ." He fell on his knees and stretched out his arms.

"You may perhaps be given the chance to do so," said Eon. He paused for a moment, sighed and went on: "The chance may come sooner than you expect. Get up, Colonel, and listen. I have certain secret matters to confide to you."

The Colonel stood up and bent down towards this delightful little creature. "This is truly a lady of Versailles," he thought. "What ineffable grace she has!"

"But I realize," continued Eon, "that you have no particular reason to believe me. I had a letter from the Vice-Chancellor for you. But unfortunately you have enemies as well as supporters, and two of them, who are also my enemies and enemies of the Empress, have destroyed that letter. One of them, the one who is now in your hands, killed a woman yesterday. But the letter has disappeared. However, fortunately I can give you proofs."

"Do not trouble about that, Madame, I beg you."

"But it is most essential, Colonel. You have a wallet which was handed to you by the man who said that he was sent by Count Bestoucheff. That man is a liar, a thief, a murderer. The wallet contains a document which I shall describe to you. Listen carefully, Colonel. Your life is at stake."

Popoff shrugged his shoulders slightly, as if to say, "What does that matter?" He was strung up like a man about to take part in a tournament or a horse race. His chance had come. He must seize it and succeed.

"It is a letter addressed to His Majesty the King of France," said Eon in a low voice.

"Oh!" said Popoff, and his face paled.

"It is sealed with the Imperial seal. Five seals of white wax. Open the wallet."

"But . . ."

"Open it!"

The Colonel was trembling so much that his hands were too clumsy to undo the ribbons. Eon, with a smile, took it from his hands, opened it and gave it back to him. "Now look."

The Colonel saw the Empress's letter spread out before him. With shining eyes he read the superscription: "To His Majesty the King of France and Navarre. At his Palace of Versailles."

He clasped his hands as if in prayer. "It hardly seems

possible. What an honour for me!" Never in the whole of his career had he dreamed that one day he would have the chance to handle such a letter.

"Look at it closely. Examine it carefully," said Eon, "for it is only right, Colonel, that you should take every possible precaution."

Popoff bowed again. For some minutes he had ceased to be merely the chief officer of a frontier post with a few miles of surrounding country to control and the duty of overseeing the high road and tracking down smugglers; now he was a man who held in his hands a letter addressed to the King of France.

"Do you know where that letter comes from, Colonel?" The Colonel shook his head. "From Her Majesty the Empress!" The Colonel raised it dutifully to his lips.

"May I now pass on to you Her Majesty's orders?"

"I beg you to do so and believe me, I will carry them out in every detail."

"You must not say a word of what you have seen. I am going to put on man's clothes again. Only you and the innkeeper from Polti will know my real sex. You must tell him that he has been dreaming, and send him back to-night to his inn; but first take his evidence which will convict the man who denounced me to you of having murdered a certain Baroness de Walberg, a spy and one of his friends. As for him, pay no attention to anything he says, or to the great names which he will try to bring into the argument, but have him hung at once."

"Hung? Do you think I can do that, Madame?"

"Hang him as a smuggler, if you like."

"Ah, yes," said the Colonel. "That would be best. I have power to hang smugglers."

"Well, do it as soon as possible and without any fuss. Put a gag in his mouth. But get the innkeeper out of the way first; there is no need for him to know anything about it."

The Colonel went out immediately, reeling with joy. He came back after a quarter of an hour and found a Chevalier dressed for travelling, with kneeboots and a cocked hat planted squarely on his head. Bowing deeply once more, he breathed, "You are ravishing, Madame, in any dress."

"Hush!" said Eon.



"Of course, yes, hush!" repeated the Colonel. "But how could I say anything else?" and he went on in a whisper, "Madame, Madame, at least allow me to call you that in my heart."

"My God, what a fool!" said Eon to himself. "Providence has certainly sent me exactly the man I needed in the circumstances."

Meanwhile, Popoff led the Chevalier to the threshold of the hut. Ten feet away, the Bear's body was swinging from the thick branch of an oak tree, lit up by torches held by two soldiers. "Are you satisfied with your slave?" he asked in a low voice.

He shut the door with a rapid movement and fell at the Chevalier's feet. "You are going away," he said, "and I shall never see you again. Ah, let me tell you . . ."

"He has fallen in love with me," thought Eon. "A woman's dress seems to suit me!" But it worried him that the redoubtable wallet was still, if not actually in the Colonel's hands, at least under his control. He might think again during the night, or when he woke in the cold light of dawn he might be afraid that he had been fooled. Eon began to laugh. "Now, you see, you want to get rid of me!" he said.

"I, Madame?"

"What sort of a man are you?" went on the Chevalier. "I don't doubt your courage, but would you dare risk everything in a supreme adventure for the greater glory of the Empress?"

"Never doubt it," answered the Colonel, "I only await your orders."

He was still on his knees, and a kneeling man is easier to persuade and less on his guard. Eon pretended to be considering what he should say. At last he spoke, half to himself: "I must somehow get to Vienna. That is if the Prussian agents with whom Poland is swarming let me through and don't kill me on the way. I brought two servants as far as Polti; they will join me to-morrow. One of them could act as your orderly."

"How do you mean?" asked the Colonel.

Eon tossed his head. "Oh, I see how it is. You hesitate to risk it. After all, your career here is all provided for; you will probably end by having a regiment of your own . . ."

"Madame," said the Colonel, "my ambitions rise higher than that. Tell me what I must do to please the Empress?"

Eon judged that he had his man. Thereupon he held out the wallet which he had on his knees. "Here is the wallet which was stolen from me and which you (as the Empress shall know) have restored to me. You shall take it, and have the honour of being Her Imperial Majesty's messenger."

The Colonel looked at him wide-eyed. His wildest hopes were realized, and any lingering suspicion which he may have had, disappeared completely. He pushed the wallet away.

"No," he said. "Keep it yourself, Madame. I will be your protector, your devoted knight-errant, and I trust that Her Majesty will think well of my devotion."

"Oh, Monsieur!" said the Chevalier, and at this point he played his part most admirably, for he had the audacity to throw himself into the arms of Popoff, whereupon the good Colonel completely forgot himself and pressed upon Eon's fair hair the chastest of kisses.

"What an idiot," thought Eon. "Now I know how men lose both hearts and wits. Certainly women have great fun at our expense!"

## CHAPTER XVII

# The Death-Ride

THIRTY DAYS LATER Eon and his companion found themselves in the best inn at Bielitz in the Carpathians, the last town in Poland, and only some twenty-five miles from the Austrian frontier. Eon had sent the two servants on ahead to prepare the way for him in Vienna, while he and the Colonel, avoiding the large towns, had travelled slowly but surely. The Colonel did not think that a young woman could keep up the pace of a Russian officer, but he was a good travelling companion with only two faults, a passion for gambling and an amorous nature which made him always something of a menace. On this last night after a good dinner the two travellers had gone up to their rooms. Eon, as was his practice, lay down on his bed fully dressed, with his pistols under the pillow and his sword within reach of his hand. Suddenly the night was filled with confused sounds. There were horses outside shaking their packs and scuffling the ground with their hooves; Eon heard what sounded like orders being given, and a rattling of curbs and sabres; a wench began to laugh and stopped short.

Ever since he had left Russia on this long ride to safety the Chevalier had been expecting to hear a sudden challenge to stop. He knew that Bestoucheff's arms were long, and it was quite possible that the Saxon King of Poland might have been brought into the business. He got up with a clutch of fear at his heart, and having made certain that the letter was still safe, slung his saddlebag over his shoulder, put on his boots and waited.

Two minutes later he heard footsteps in the passage. He had made up his mind that if anyone came into the room he would somehow get away, but he knew that his was a desperate hope, for both his horse and Popoff's would have been stabled by this time. The steps came nearer and he heard the innkeeper's voice. Then the men, of whom there seemed to be

two, stopped outside Popoff's door and knocked. Evidently it was Popoff they wanted to see, and Eon heard his sleepy voice calling to them to come in, grumbling to himself, getting up and opening the door. The innkeeper went downstairs again. Without hesitation the Chevalier wrapped himself in his cloak and followed the landlord. He felt that anything was better than being trapped in his own room.

In the big room where earlier they had dined, two soldiers rose to their feet when they saw the Chevalier. One of them made a peremptory gesture and said a few words which Eon could not understand, but the intention was obvious; he was barring the way.

Without making any attempt to argue, Eon went upstairs again. At the top of the stairs he took off his boots and felt his way along the wall to the Colonel's door; not even a floorboard creaked. Inside the room two men, the Colonel and a stranger, were talking German; the second man suddenly raised his voice, and Eon recognized it as the voice of the Bear! For a moment the shock unnerved him; he leaned against the wall and his face went white as he faced the prospect of dying within sight of his goal. He suddenly remembered that when he left the priest's house at Sviet-Petka he had felt the Bear's body as he passed the branch from which it was hanging and had noticed that it was still warm. Curse these Russians! They must have made a bad job of hanging him, and then cut him down, unless indeed the branch or the noose had broken under the man's weight just after they had left. And there was always the possibility that Popoff, who was capable of anything, might have betrayed him.

Two minutes after Eon had got back to his own room and taken off his boots the door was thrown open violently. The Colonel stood there, his face contorted and his eyes glittering wildly. Eon realized at once that he had come to terms with the newcomers.

"Shall we have a game to-night?" he asked, tersely.

"Why not?"

The first three throws went against the Colonel and each time he called for double or quits. When he had lost forty louis Eon remarked, "You are rich to-night, Colonel."

"Do you think I shan't be able to pay?" asked the Colonel. "Look at this!" and he threw a heavy purse on the table.

"He has been bribed, as I thought," said Eon to himself. But Popoff went on throwing, and increasing the stakes, until suddenly the luck changed. Eon, watching carefully, became aware that the Colonel's sleeve rested rather too long on the table each time. But he gave no sign of having noticed. Gazing at the flies on the ceiling, he took the dice from Popoff and threw eight. As Popoff picked up the dice, his sleeve swept the table again. Eon guessed then that when he threw he substituted a loaded dice for one of the others, one which would always turn up a six. It was the classic trick by which beginners were rooked. Sure enough, the Colonel's throw registered a six and a three.

Popoff looked slyly at the Chevalier. "That makes two hundred and seventy louis you owe me," he said.

"Very well, I will settle all that at Versailles."

"Why not now?"

Eon made a show of temper. "Do you want my watch?" he asked.

"No, Madame, but I will give you a chance to get even. Your wallet against three hundred louis."

"My wallet? Why, Colonel, it seems that you would like to present your Empress's letter to my King with your own hands."

"I would."

"Or to sell it on the way, perhaps?"

Popoff's face went white. "If you were a man," he said, "I would run you through for that." He took a step towards Eon, who drew his sword. Popoff was laughing as he came round the table. "That's no toy for a little girl," he said. "You will hurt yourself." But before he knew what was happening he felt a stab in his face which stopped him dead. "Little bitch!" he shouted. "You nearly put my eye out." And, drawing his own sword, he added, "It's my turn to prick your face for you. That will keep you quiet." But as the swords crossed he felt that his enemy had a wrist of iron. "That's a man's wrist," he said. "Is it possible?"

With clenched teeth and a frown in his face, Popoff covered

up and tried to block Eon's thrust. But the Chevalier, laughing happily, disengaged at once and touched him on the chest, tearing his coat, but not wounding him. Popoff blanched. "Are you man or woman?" he asked.

"Come and find out!" was the answer. Popoff was lighter on his feet than one would have expected from a great raw-boned fellow like him, and he had a tremendous advantage in reach, but his style was too elementary and impetuous, and he realized at once that he had met his match. Eon pushed him back step by step until his shoulders were touching the wall. Then a curious thing happened; the Colonel fell on one knee, although Eon knew that he had not wounded him. Suddenly he threw off his pretence of hurt, with a twisted mouth and a half-shut eye, and shifting his sword to his left hand, seized the scabbard on which he had been leaning and threw it with all his strength at his enemy. Eon leapt aside like a cat and the scabbard crashed against the wall behind him.

Both men cried out, one in fury, the other in indignation. Popoff rushed forward, only to find himself facing the inexorable point of Eon's sword held in an unshakable grip. This time he was driven savagely back to the wall and there, in spite of his gnashing of teeth and his flood of oaths, the sword, after dancing a moment before his eyes, was pushed against his chest like the horn of a charging bull. It pierced him, transfixed him, pinned him to the wall and there he stayed, dead on his feet, with dangling head and arms.

"One more the less," said Eon.

For the moment everything was quiet; no one was moving anywhere near him. It seemed that everyone was down below. Eon undressed quickly and put on his petticoats again and in a quarter of an hour he was once more the lovely woman who had dazzled Popoff at Sviet-Petka. He could not free his own sword from the body pinned to the wall, but he took Popoff's and hid it under his cloak, and with his pistols in his pockets he went unhurriedly down the stairs. There was no one in the big room below except the two soldiers who had stopped him before. When they saw a woman coming, they leered at her, but made no movement. Obviously they were there to stop men, not women. One of them hazarded a joke, but Eon

shrugged his shoulders and made no answer. The fellows were dazed by his appearance; they dared not lay a hand on him, for they were afraid of getting into trouble with a lady of importance. All they could do was to gape at her and at one another.

Meanwhile Eon went straight to the outer door and passed through it, shutting it quietly behind him. On his right he saw a group of horsemen round a fire. Some were standing and some sitting on the ground, but all of them had their arms through their horses' bridles. Their shadows made a pattern on the ground. Straight ahead of him two men were walking silently along an alleyway; one of them carried his sword under his arm like a cane—the other's heavy, bowed figure was recognizable at a glance. The Bear! Nearer to him, on the left, a soldier was holding three horses. Two of these, the two best, obviously belonged to the Bear and to the officer. Eon saw at once that one was a fine Mecklenburg charger of the type the Prussians use for their cavalry regiments, finding them altogether superior to the native horses.

"That's the one I want," he said to himself. He took in all the horse's fine points, and although it was too dark to be sure of the colour he took it to be a bay. He could see a white star on its head, and the left hindfoot was white, which, according to the French Army saying, marked it as a "Hun's horse." Eon smiled at the creature. "You will carry me as fast as Attila," he said, and edged a little nearer still. The two men were still walking with their backs to him; the horse stretched his neck towards Eon; his expressive eyes shone in the moonlight and his nostrils flared widely. "Ah, you breathe well, my friend," said Eon. "That chest of yours is good for twenty miles at the gallop."

The two men had not yet reached the end of the alley, but they would be there at any moment, and as soon as they turned round the Chevalier would have the whole lot after him. There was not a moment to be lost. Eon seized the horse's bridle, but the groom held on to it. He was astonished at the appearance of this woman by his side. He supposed she must be the friend of one of his superiors and he muttered, "What do you want?" in the half-peevisish, half good-natured voice which men reserve

for inquisitive women. For answer Eon pulled out a pistol and pushed it against his chest. The soldier gave a startled exclamation and let go of the bridle. Without a word, Eon jumped into the saddle and rode off. The soldier shouted and the two men turned round. At first glance they thought it was a case of a horse escaping, but as Eon passed near them at the gallop the officer caught a glimpse of his petticoats and took a chance shot at him with his pistol. But in his anxiety for the horse he aimed too high. Eon had already reached the end of the alley and tore out on to the road.

Up roar and confusion broke out behind him. The air was thick with shouts, curses, orders. Then everybody was mounted, and the Bear led the chase while the officer rode behind him swearing, for it was his charger which had been taken and he knew that however hard he spurred the soldier's horse he was riding he had no chance of catching the great bay, the beat of whose powerful hooves, as he galloped down the high road, came to their ears in a glorious, regular rhythm. For an hour or more Eon kept up this regular gallop and the horse, carrying his light weight, never stumbled or showed the slightest signs of slackening. He seemed to be choosing the path with almost magical skill, even to the extent of slowing down as they crossed a shallow ditch. At uphill stretches Eon came down to walking pace, listening for any sound of pursuit. At regular intervals, he reined in the horse wherever there was any cover available, and gave him a breathing space, waiting to start again until he heard the enemy's hoof-beats. It was essential not to allow them to get too close, for Eon had noticed that the cavalrymen who had surrounded the house at Bielitz all carried muskets. But now the road was going downhill and he knew that from this point which was marked by a Calvary on his left, it was only some ten miles to the Oder.

At one moment he was worried by the idea that he could hear a horse galloping on his right. The noise faded away and then he heard it again; he thought that it might have been an echo. He had left Bielitz, he supposed, about two o'clock in the morning; dawn should break soon. The outlines of the wood were growing sharper every minute, while the sky was taking on a lighter tint and the stars were fading one by one. Below



him he could make out the valley of the Oder, full of a light mist. He looked eagerly ahead, straining his eyes for the first sight of the little town of Tesin. He had not left the road, so the town should be straight in front of him. Sure enough a steeple suddenly appeared between the trees to his left and Eon gave an involuntary cry of triumph. He could even make out the roofs of some houses by this time and he felt that he had reached safety.

The road ran down into the valley in five or six wide loops and the river lay before him like a silver arrow. The Oder, here not far from its source, was a shallow little river, bubbling over a pebbly bed. A wooden bridge led to the village, with a little building at either end of it. There were no men to be seen on the bridge, but there was a closed barrier at each end. The barriers were about six feet high, not enough to stop a horse of the quality Eon had between his legs. He began to laugh and patted the horse on the neck. "You can carry me over that, old friend," he said out loud.

When he turned back in his saddle he saw no one behind him; but ahead of him he saw a group of horsemen, led by a woman, ride out from a house in the village. He wondered if they were friends or enemies. The woman was not armed. The others, several of whom were in the attractive Hungarian dress with fur bonnets and a cloak hanging from the left shoulder, had swords in their hands. "Good Lord," thought Eon, "everybody is after me. If it is not the Saxon King of Poland, it is the Queen-Empress of Bohemia and Hungary. I could wish they would pay me a little less honour."

But suddenly the Polish gang burst out at full speed from a turning and barred the way. Evidently they had found a short cut. The Bear and the officer headed the party. The officer was brandishing his sword and shouting. The Bear said nothing, but he carried a musket and now he was raising it to his shoulder. Behind, hurrying to catch them up, came the rest of the soldiers. Eon realized the seriousness of the danger. If he spurred on his horse and tried to ride past them he risked a musket shot at practically point-blank range. It was a bad business, especially as the shouting had brought the sentry, who carried a gun, out of his little house on the bridge. What

particularly annoyed the Chevalier was that he was afraid of looking ridiculous with his petticoats drawn up, his little shoes and his woman's head-dress. He felt that nothing could be worse than being killed to the sound of his enemies' laughter. Meantime, he gathered up his reins and charged straight at the two leaders, saying to himself that if he had to die he might as well kill one of them first. His horse went like the wind, and Eon encouraged it with words of approval whispered in its ear. The Polish officer rode forward to meet him; the Bear hung back a little. Eon hurled his horse straight at the officer who, in face of this thunderbolt, tried to make his mount rear. Next moment there was a terrific shock and horse and man rolled in the dust and lay still. Eon, still with a pistol in his hand, had not even swayed in the saddle. He jumped over his victim's body and at the same moment the Bear, sitting firmly on a motionless horse, raised his musket and fired. Confident that he would miss, Eon continued to gallop straight at him, and as he went he remembered the French cavalry rule, "Before firing, wait till you see the whites of the enemy's eyes." With his own eyes fixed on the Bear, he saw the flash of his gun and at the same moment felt what seemed like a blow from a club on his left arm and heard the noise of the shot. The reins fell from his left hand, but he still controlled the horse with his legs. Then he saw the white of the eye and fired. The Bear fell, with a bullet through his head, and his horse made off.

"Two less," said Eon to himself. "He preferred shooting to hanging; he had the right to choose."

Now there was nothing in front of him. His left arm hung by his side and hurt terribly and his shirt was soaked in blood. The Polish soldiers came up behind him, shouting, but they were too late. The Polish sentry at the barrier had panicked and thrown himself against the guard-rail, shielding his head with his arm. Eon gathered his horse and the charger rose magnificently to the obstacle and landed square on his feet on the bridge. And there facing him were Maria-Theresa's cavalymen and their woman leader. This, then was the last fight of all, and he must not fall from his horse till it was over. Everybody was shouting and shouting again. What they were shouting about he had no idea, but that didn't matter; everyone always shouts

when they are attacking the enemy. All he knew was that they wanted to get hold of his letter from the Empress to the King. Eon raised his sword in the air and charged them. He swore to himself that he would get past them and ride on till his horse foundered like the good French dragoon that he was.

He could not see anything now but a bloody mist in which flashes of lightning mingled with confused pictures of Heart's Delight and Bragard. Dreams . . . all dreams . . . Then a clear voice, a voice he knew so well, rang in his ears. Dear God, the past was coming back. Eon laid about him at random. Here on the borders of Poland, hundreds of miles from Versailles, he was hearing the voice of his beloved. That is what comes of galloping twenty-five miles on end and then getting a bullet in one's arm. One's head begins to swim and one has visions of another world. And now Eon's arm fell helplessly at his side, as he was borne onward on to Austrian soil in this mad cavalcade. His body grew limp; he was nothing more than a rag doll. His horse went on its way between his helpless legs. Above him he sensed there was sword upon sword. He heard the woman calling out, "Hold him up, for Heaven's sake!" These were indeed strange enemies! "I will not surrender!" he shouted, and then wondered if he had really shouted, or if he had only formed the words in his mind. The sky and the earth were spinning round and round, quicker and quicker; the light was the colour of blood and he fell from his horse with a last sigh.

All was quiet. The sun was shining. Birds were singing in a garden nearby.

"Now I know I am mad," said the Chevalier to himself. "Or was the good priest who first taught me right after all and have I found my way to Paradise?"

Disordered images swum in his mind. He saw the Oder foaming over its pebbles, the clash of arms above his head, the Polish officer brandishing his sword, the evil face of the Bear, the tumult and the glitter of the Imperial cavalry. Then his mind cleared and he saw that he was in bed—in a real bed with four posts and four linen curtains worked with the figures of men and women costumed as in stage-plays. And through a parting in the curtains he seemed to see a room which reminded him of the room in his old home at Tonnerre, where as

a small boy he had cherished his first foolish ambitions. The only difference was that this room was blue and the other had been yellow. He tried to sit up and just checked a cry of pain. His arm . . . ah yes, of course, his arm was broken. Broken? Perhaps not, but at least it was badly hurt. It was firmly held by a dressing. "Well, here I am," he thought. "Obviously, a prisoner. But whose? And the wallet, my God! Where is the wallet? Taken, of course, taken from me with the Empress's letter in it. Wretched man that I am!" Overcome with misery he cried out aloud, "I am a prisoner!"

A door opened and there was a swift, light step on the floor. "Yes! Yes! you are my prisoner," said a woman's voice.

In the dim light he heard the rustle of a silk dress. The curtains were drawn aside and he saw a bare arm and a wrapper which showed him a square of milk-white breast set off by a black ribbon round the neck. A lovely face bent over him and in it he saw those beautiful grey eyes whose memory came straight from Versailles. Oh dear . . . what funny things fever can do to a man! Two hands took his free hand between them.

"Chevalier . . ."

"Am I dreaming?"

"No, Chevalier, you are not dreaming."

"Is it really you, Madame?"

"Dear soul, not everyone has forsaken you, but how badly you use those who come to your help."

Eon raised Mme de Rochefort's hand to his lips and still he could not get over his astonishment. "So you were the horse-woman; it was you who saved me?"

"There is one heart at least on this earth which will be always yours—and that is my heart."

"Ah! Madame, what more could I ask?"

"Dear child . . ."

So she uttered once again the sweet phrase which she had used to him for the first time just before they parted. And now she was leaning down to him. Yes, it was true. He saw her face, her eyes, her lips and then with one hand round her shoulders he drew this lovely woman close to him.

"I was your first friend, Chevalier."

“My only friend, Marie . . .”

The room with its curtains and its figures had vanished. Eon was lost in the woman he loved, and the whole world with its mountains and its seas, its towns and forests, its empires and its seething masses had shrunk within the compass of a single kiss.

## CHAPTER XVIII

# No Longer Alone

"NOW WE CAN talk," said Mme de Rochefort.

The surgeon had just gone, after a rather brutal operation which Eon had borne with his teeth clenched. As the good man held up the big bullet in triumph the Chevalier allowed himself a large glassful of kirsch. It appeared that the wound was not serious; the bullet had been fired at too long a range and the bone was untouched. After a week's rest Eon should be able to ride again and in a month his arm would be as strong and supple as ever. The room now held, in addition to the invalid in bed and Mme de Rochefort in her armchair, a third person, an aristocratic-looking gentleman with a heavy black moustache, who had been introduced to the wounded man as Count Korfanty.

Mme de Rochefort explained that having been alarmed by Eon's last letter to Conti she had taken advantage of her husband's absence on business affairs in Spain and had managed to get as far as Moravia with the passport of a friend who had been on the point of going to Budapest and had been prevented by illness. There she had met Eon's servants, who put her on the right track, and knowing that one of Korfanty's properties was close to the point at which he must cross from Poland into Austria, she had made her way to the bridge, over which Eon had made his charge.

"And so you saved me!"

"You must thank the Count, my friend. Without him I could have done nothing and your pursuers would certainly have caught you again. And we are now his guests, in one of his hunting lodges."

Eon turned towards the gloomy aristocrat, and said what courtesy demanded he should say—but he spoke without warmth. Nor was there anything more than forced politeness in the deep bow with which the other acknowledged his words.

"Now I see," said Eon to himself. "This creature is in love with my dear lady. But, my good hussar (for I believe all Hungarians are hussars) I have no intention of letting you have her." The two men smiled at one another with a brave show of politeness, but their eyes looked daggers.

"Do you realize," asked Mme de Rochefort, "that Mme de Pompadour doesn't want you back? Have you any idea why?"

"How should I know, Madame? They have probably been telling her frightful stories about me." As he said this in a perfectly calm voice Eon reflected that he had become an accomplished liar.

"Every time the King mentions you—and he does so very often, for he has found out that it upsets the Marquise, and he loves teasing her—she makes a face and says 'That little man!'"

"Does she indeed? 'That little man!'" repeated Eon, while a sly smile passed over the Hungarian's face.

"Yes, those are her words. And she adds, 'You will never see him again.' Be very careful, Chevalier; this means that she does not intend you to get back. I feel sure she has personal reasons. (Eon did not move a muscle.) And probably there may be political reasons as well, about which I know nothing. I have been wondering whether she has come to some understanding with the august sovereign of the countries through which we are travelling."

The Hungarian bowed, and Eon answered, "You are perfectly right, Madame. It is a fact that the Marquise has written to the Empress, who, in her answer, addressed her as 'My dear friend.'"

"Could that be possible?" asked the Count with a sneer.

"Oh yes," said Eon. "Even sovereigns have their weak moments, and after all it is not a high price to pay for the friendship and support of a King's mistress to write to her as 'My dear friend.'"

And he added with a smile which showed some pride: "As a matter of fact, the letter which I am carrying is not at all objectionable to Vienna; it is right in line with their policy. But the Marquise wants to take all the credit for it, and she would be delighted if one of her own men were to take it away from me and bring it to the King himself. Then she would

say, 'Look what I have done for Your Majesty,' and your Chevalier would be no use for anything except to be thrown to the dogs. And that is why I must travel first through the Empire and then through France with my sword in my hand."

"Yes; I think that is more or less the position," said Mme de Rochefort. She spoke slowly and gave a sigh. She was wondering if the Marquise could have learnt of her own journey. "If she does find out," she said to herself, "she will try to ruin me. She will warn my husband, and that will stir up one more enemy for us."

Next morning Eon, who had slept well, began to feel full of energy again. Suddenly there was a peremptory knock on his door, and the Hungarian came in. Eon realized that the critical moment had come. The other man was going to make his position clear.

"Monsieur," began the Count, speaking French clumsily but correctly, "you probably know that I am a distant relation of Mme de Rochefort. I was at Versailles ten years ago, attached to our Embassy there. At that time I would have liked to marry the lady, but another man was more fortunate than I was. I never expected to see her again, but I met her here a week ago. May I assure you that I love her as much now as when we first met?"

Eon bowed without answering.

"She is dressing now, and cannot overhear us. I swear by Almighty God that I will not let her be taken from me a second time."

"Monsieur," interrupted Eon, "will you tell me in a word or two what this is all about?"

The Hungarian kept looking at the door as if he was afraid that it would be opened. His face quivered and he seemed to be suffering an almost uncontrollable spasm of rage. "Monsieur," he said, "I have promised Mme de Rochefort to bring you safely to the French frontier, and I shall do so, for love of her, but only one of us must cross that frontier, and you know why."

"I know nothing of the kind, but I am willing to listen." He spoke coldly; he had no intention of betraying his own feelings.

The Hungarian burst out laughing, "So you don't know the



reason. The reason is, let me tell you, that I am in your way and you in mine."

"Monsieur, I assure you that you are not in my way at all."

"By God, if you were not wounded, I would make you straightway sorry for that insult!"

"Insult, Monsieur? Where is the insult?"

The Hungarian laughed so offensively that the Chevalier, who had been quite calm up to this point, suddenly found himself getting very angry. The other went on, "I see you are in petticoats again, Monsieur. Must I suppose that you have a woman's heart as well?"

Eon coloured. "This damned mission is playing the devil with me," he thought. And shaking his head he added aloud, "Let's settle the matter once and for all. When and where?"

"At the French frontier," suggested the Hungarian. "And as for the letter you are carrying, I will be responsible, if it should happen that you are not able . . ."

"Don't worry about the letter," interrupted the Chevalier, drily. "Mme de Rochefort will take charge of it if necessary, but it is more likely that you will have no opportunity to go to Versailles and kiss the King's hand."

The man bowed and went out, stamping his feet in a fury. Eon lay back in his chair and laughed, but suddenly leapt to his feet as a voice called him. He saw a wild head framed in the window. "Ah, Heart's Delight, it's you!" he said. "You frightened me."

Heart's Delight seemed to be fearfully upset. "Do you know who has just arrived by exactly the same road as we came by?" he asked, but as Eon waited calmly the head suddenly disappeared; there was a noise of a body falling and then silence.

Eon rushed to the window, but there was nothing to be seen but the first slopes of the Carpathians with their great pine forests which came down almost close enough for him to touch them. Suddenly he heard a voice he knew well, coming apparently from the next room. It spoke French with a strong English accent. Lord Ferrers!

"I am really most grateful for your hospitality, Count," Lord Ferrers was saying. "We shall not abuse it. We have come from Warsaw, my wife and I, and we intend to push on to

Vienna as fast as we can ride. Yes, it's a good ride, but Lady Ferrers is a marvellous horsewoman. We . . . how shall I put it . . . ?"

"Go on, my dear. Speak up," urged Lady Ferrers. Her voice was softer and more musical than his, but you could hear the strong character behind it. It was obvious that they were talking to Count Korfanty.

"I am attached to the British Embassy at the Tsarina's court," Lord Ferrers went on. "The fact is we are interested—yes, that's it, interested . . ." He hesitated again and as the Hungarian still said nothing, he finally added, " . . . in a young man."

"In a young woman!" broke in Lady Ferrers hurriedly.

With his ear pressed against the wooden partition, Eon took in every word. There was another short pause; then the Count said, "There is no one here except two Parisian ladies of quality. They are friends of mine and they have come from Paris."

"From Paris?"

"Yes. They are cousins of mine and they are only here for the moment, to hunt."

"To hunt?"

"Why, yes, of course." So saying, the Count went out and Lord Ferrers spoke in a very low voice, almost inaudible to Eon. "It's no good, my dear. You can't fool a Scotsman. Your Beaumont *is* here and he *is* a man."

"If she is here, she is a woman," hissed his wife between her teeth.

"I offered to bet a thousand guineas; I'll make it two thousand."

"Taken!"

"He has won his bet," thought Eon, "but he doesn't know it. And since I am the person to furnish the proof, I am in no hurry."

The man began scolding again. "I will show him to you stark naked, as you saw him back in Russia—do you hear me?"

She sneered.

"And that will prove that you are a whore, madam."

She sneered again.

"Yes, a whore, I tell you! A whore, unworthy to live in the company of an Admiral of the Royal Navy."

"Prove it, you big bully, prove it. Bring him to me, as you put it with your usual filthy coarseness, stark naked, and when you do that, you cruel man, I undertake to acknowledge my guilt in public."

Lord Ferrers went out without saying any more and the door banged. Eon bolted his own door. A quarter of an hour later he heard a light step in the passage and the handle of his door was turned. After trying in vain to open it, Lady Ferrers whispered, "Who's in there?"

No answer.

"Is it you, Chevalier?" Again no answer. After a few seconds she went on in a terrified voice, "If you have any pleasant memories of me, I beg you to keep to your woman's clothes. Save me, Chevalier, save me!"

All of a sudden there came a shout from outside, in English, "There you are; there is one of the servants. I know him!"

Bragard was being chased by Lord Ferrers and was trying to escape into the stables. But the way was blocked by Lord Ferrer's man and by two stout Highlanders whom he had hired in St. Petersburg—men who had been pressed into the Navy and had been only too glad to get out of it. All these men threw themselves on Bragard, with Lord Ferrers leading them. Then Heart's Delight rushed up to join in the struggle.

"There are both of them now," cried the Englishman; "and their master can't be far away. Lay hold of them both."

The Frenchmen struggled vigorously, but they were two against four and it was a hopeless battle; they were violently thrown to the ground and pinned down by brute force, when suddenly something fell on the group like a thunderbolt. This something held a sword which it handled with astonishing skill. Lord Ferrers was slightly wounded in the shoulder to his surprise and indignation, and in less time than it takes to tell the three English servants were lying on the ground, more or less severely wounded, while the two Frenchmen celebrated their victory by kicking them brutally in the ribs.

Meanwhile Lord Ferrers had drawn his sword, but when he

saw his adversary's clothes he shouted, "Are you man or woman?"

"Ask Madame," answered Eon impudently, waving his sword towards Lady Ferrers, who was running breathlessly towards them.

"I have told you already, Bertie," she cried. "She's a woman."

Lord Ferrers hesitated, lowering his sword.

"Do you dare give the lie to your own wife?"

Just at that moment Mme de Rochefort appeared on the scene and threw her arms round Eon. "My dear Léa," she said tenderly, "how rash of you. You will certainly take cold." With that she hugged him to her and kissed him on the forehead.

Lady Ferrers turned to her husband, "You owe me two thousand guineas, my dear!"

And she went up to Eon and embraced him in her turn. Eon was too taken aback to avoid her kisses and even though his beloved was watching, he was glad that he had not avoided them, for he suddenly saw that the face which was pressed against his was ravaged by fear. Between closed lips, Lady Ferrers whispered in a low, broken voice, "Thank you, Chevalier."

"We must get away," said Mme de Rochefort.

"We certainly must," agreed Count Korfanty; "and as quickly as possible."

"How do you feel?" Mme de Rochefort asked Eon. He said he felt reasonably well. Certainly his left arm could not be depended on, but the right was in trim, and if the Englishman had insisted on fighting, he could have dealt with him without any doubt.

"We shall have to travel on horseback, and make at least sixty miles a day," said the Count.

"I can do twice that if need be," said Eon with a shrug of his shoulders. "But please give me man's clothes; they had better be those of the smallest servant you have. I have suddenly a great wish to be a dragoon again."

Ten minutes later the three of them were ready to start with the two servants in attendance.

"Koloman!" shouted the Count. There was no answer. "Koloman!" he shouted again, angrily this time.

Count Korfanty was one of those feudal landowners who are accustomed to instant obedience. He seized his riding whip and strode off to the stables. Suddenly they heard a shout of surprise and rushed to his side. There they found Koloman tied up like a parcel on the straw and the stalls empty. As soon as they had released the groom and taken the gag out of his mouth he launched on a frenzy of explanation. But the Count told him to stop, for it was quite obvious what had happened. The Englishman and his wife, with the two servants who were only slightly hurt, had abandoned the other man who had been severely wounded by Eon's sword-thrust and had taken the Count's four fresh horses. They had led them by the bridle in order not to raise an alarm and had gone quietly out by the back way and made off.

At this moment Mme de Rochefort called attention to a letter which had been laid on one of the wooden posts at the entrance to the loose boxes. The Count read it aloud:

"Lord Ferrers apologizes profoundly to Count Korfanty for the emergency which has made it necessary to borrow his horses. He felt himself obliged to do this in the interests of His Britannic Majesty, and perhaps also in those of Her Apostolic Majesty the Empress."

After a long pause Mme de Rochefort asked, "What now?"

"Madame," answered the Count, "ten miles from here is one of my castles, the only one in Moravian territory. Koloman will hurry there on foot. He will have six horses made ready and brought to us here. Thank heaven, I have spare horses enough. But all that will take five or six hours, which will give our enemies a long start. And I must admit that, without counting the wonderful Mecklenburg charger which the Chevalier was riding, the horses they have taken from us were the best I had."

## CHAPTER XIX

# The Citadel of Olmutz

"WHAT ARE YOU doing, you wretch?" cried Mme de Rochefort as she got out of bed.

"As you see, Madame, I am putting on your clothes."

There was no sound in the inn itself, but outside the windows they could hear the Count shouting at the grooms. They were about ten miles from Olmutz and a hundred and twenty from Passau, where they proposed to cross into Bavaria, thus passing to the north of Vienna. Indeed, anything seemed better than to fall back on Silesia and so put themselves in the power of King Frederick. As for going through Vienna, which was obviously closely watched as being the heart of the Empire, that would be to risk arrest twenty times over. For the moment they needed a carriage which would make the greatest possible speed, for they could not reasonably treat Mme de Rochefort as a cavalryman and Eon refused to hear of going without her.

"And what about me?" asked the astonished Countess. "What clothes do you expect me to wear?"

"Why, mine, of course, Madame."

"A man's clothes, Chevalier; you expect me to dress like a man?"

He looked tenderly at her, "Would you love your Léa any less?"

They began to laugh, and in a few minutes both were dressed as Eon had suggested. When the Count came in he nearly fell over in surprise.

"You have not finished with the shocks in store for you," said Eon. "Allow me to present the Count de Rochefort, a gentleman of France, and a friend of yours."

Count Korfanty sneered, but next minute they were all three in the carriage, with Mme de Rochefort in the middle and the three servants holding the horses behind them.

"May I ask for an explanation?" began the Count, but Eon put a finger to his lips.

"All in good time," he said.

Two stages later, the postmaster, who knew the Count well, told them that the road was guarded.

"This morning," he said, "one of Her Majesty's officials was here, giving the impression that he had nothing particular to do. He waited, holding a fresh horse by the bridle until he saw you, and then he made off at full speed, and I don't doubt that at this moment he is burning up the road. The man was a spy."

"He is going to set up a barricade," cried Eon. "Very well, we must pass through it."

The Count started. "Pass through the armed forces of Her Imperial Majesty?" he laughed sarcastically.

"Monsieur," said Eon, "I owe you one sword-thrust; I will give you two."

"Before you have time to give me one, Monsieur," answered the Count, "we shall be locked up. You have no idea of the storm which is going to burst over our heads."

"I have a perfectly good idea of it. And here is how I propose to counter it." He spoke with such authority, this little devil, that they listened to him without a word of protest.

"The spy," he went on, "is not concerned about Madame, nor about you, Monsieur. He is looking for a woman. Very well, we will give him one. I shall set off by myself in head-dress and petticoat. You will follow at some distance as if we were not together. I shall take no escort. I am going to give my letter to Madame and I rely on you, Monsieur, to escort her yourself as far as the frontier."

"As far as Versailles, you mean," said the Count.

"No, Monsieur," said Eon. "You forget we have a little matter to settle with one another before we cross the frontier."

"Yes; that is so."

"Very well, then; we meet at the frontier. and I will look after myself as best I can in the meantime."

"Chevalier," asked Mme de Rochefort, "do you think I am willing to abandon you like that?"

"Madame, the King's service . . ."

"I have not forgotten that, but there must be moderation in all things. You need not fear for the safety of your letter, but in Heaven's name, if you . . ."

She broke off the sentence with a blush. Eon realized as well as if she had pronounced the words that she had been going to say, "If you love me." "Dear soul," he said to himself, "indeed I love you and for your sake I have no intention of rushing to my death. All the same, I shall have one more try, as the excellent Count Voronzov would say, to pull Death by the beard."

An hour later the post-chaise was travelling at full speed on the road to Brunn, with no one in it except Eon in his woman's clothes. The rest of the party followed at a distance. The first post was passed without incident. When they arrived at the second there was a challenge: "In the name of the Emperor."

Two wagons were drawn across the road. A number of soldiers were posted behind them with bayonets fixed. A man came forward with a drawn sword in his hand, followed by two others. He was shouting loudly in German. Eon understood enough to realize what he was trying to say, but he pretended to be completely ignorant of the language. Gathering his petticoats round him, he stepped out of the carriage. "What is it, Messieurs?" he asked.

For a moment the officials were halted in their tracks at the sight of this pretty and elegant young woman; she looked so little like an enemy of the Empress that they lowered their swords; one of them thrust his head into the carriage to see if by any chance there was some other quarry concealed there. He came out sniffing happily, for Mme de Rochefort had poured her last bottle of scent all over it. Then at last the leader made up his mind; even then he dared not lay his hand on those lovely shoulders, but he took a step forward and began, "In the name of the Emperor . . ." and as he dared not say "Monsieur" which was what he believed or "Madame" as the evidence of his eyes suggested, he simply added, "I arrest you!"

He still spoke German and as Eon made no response, he added, with the gesture of a man turning a key, "Prison!"

"Oh, my God!" cried Eon.



"There is no need to be alarmed, Madame . . ." said the officer. He still spoke German and Eon still pretended not to understand. He showed a terrified face and tried, though without success, to bring tears into his eyes. The officials stood round with an air of consternation. Suddenly, as he gazed round the countryside, he saw a group of horsemen about a quarter of a mile away. At the head of it were Count Korfanty and Mme de Rochefort, the latter looking like a young secretary attached to a great household. The servants followed. They were coming at walking pace and showed no signs of being in a hurry to catch up with him. Meanwhile, the horses had been changed and his captor was making signs to Eon that they must go on. He repeated the name "Olmutz" five or six times and added, "Citadel, citadel."

"Olmutz?" repeated Eon. "Citadel?" and with all the graciousness of a great lady he signed to the officer to take a seat beside him in the perfumed vehicle, which set off at a good speed with the escort galloping beside it.

"Olmutz, the citadel," thought Eon. "That's where I'm going—in other words, I'm a prisoner. Only I haven't got my letter with me. This is what huntsmen would call hunting a ten-point stag and coming up with a brocket."

"Baron de Mulhausen," the Governor introduced himself with a bow. Eon dropped him a curtsy.

"Demoiselle Léa de Beaumont, at your service, Monsieur le Gouverneur."

They were in the courtyard of the fortress, and the soldiers were gaping in silence at this charming vision of young femininity. The Governor turned to the police officer who had brought in this quarry and said to him in an angry voice, "Monsieur Chotek, do you not think you have made a silly mistake?"

Chotek bowed low. He was a little sallow, bilious-looking man, slightly cross-eyed. Ugly and pock-marked to boot, he gave a twisted smile, half-contemptuous and half-apprehensive and said, "I assure you, Monsieur le Gouverneur, there was no other woman at all in the postchaise."

The governor had given Eon a chair and was walking up and down in a state of agitation. In a low voice he read over his

orders again, while Chotek listened and punctuated every sentence with a nod of confirmation.

"You are to arrest and put in a cell under close guard, the Chevalier Eon, captain of dragoons, who is returning from St. Petersburg carrying papers which are of great importance to Her Imperial Majesty. The Chevalier Eon is accustomed to dress in woman's clothes. He is to be treated with all possible courtesy, but you are to send all his papers to us as quickly as possible."

"A captain of dragoons," thought the Governor. "They certainly have some funny ideas at Vienna. Does this look like a captain of dragoons? As for the papers, where could they be? I don't see any wallet."

The carriage had already been thoroughly searched by Chotek himself who had found nothing but a young woman's luggage with all the usual appurtenances. He had reported with disgust that no papers at all had been found. "Unless of course she has them on her person," he added.

Mulhausen shrugged his shoulder. "The fools have let some person heavily disguised as a peasant woman slip through their hands, and they have arrested this child. What a wretched business. . . . God! How badly the Empress is served."

He turned to Eon. "May I ask with whom I am dealing, Madame?" He heavily stressed the "Madame."

"With the most unhappy of creatures," answered Eon with a curtsy, "with a reader to Her Majesty the Empress of Russia, summoned home by a loss in her family and forced to travel with the greatest speed for fear that what little fortune she may expect should be stolen from her."

"Poor child," said the Governor, "permit me to assure you of my sympathy."

"Your soldiers surrounded me at the last post but one and brought me here. Am I going to come to harm, Monsieur le Gouverneur?"

"Not at my hands, at least," said the Governor. "Of that you may be certain. Not for all the gold in the world would I harm you."

"Ah!" said Eon, "I have been told that Austrians are the most courteous of men."

"In dealing with a French lady, who would not be?" cried the Governor.

Eon smiled. "Monsieur, I am entirely at your orders."

"Good God!" thought the Governor. "What fools these policemen are! That Chotek who brings this girl to me and thinks he has caught a captain of dragoons. What a fool Chotek is." Then he suddenly remembered something. "But I am afraid I must ask you if you are not by any chance carrying a letter with you—perhaps a letter that someone in Russia gave you to take to France?"

"Good Heavens, no! Monsieur le Gouverneur—nothing of that kind at all. And to tell you the truth, I haven't even got a passport; you see, they didn't want to let me go, so I had to run away. But of course you can have my luggage examined," he added in a humble voice.

"That I have done, Madame, in accordance with my instructions, and nothing was found. But you might be carrying it on your person?"

"On my person?" said Eon. There was a world of indignation in his voice; this poor woman was obviously grievously hurt by such an unjust suggestion. "On me? No, Monsieur le Gouverneur, I have nothing on my person. But," he added with a smile and blush, "I beg you to have me searched by a person of my own sex."

"Honestly," thought the Governor, "those people at Vienna are idiots. And as for this Chotek— Good Lord! how could any man be such a fool as to take this young woman for a captain of dragoons?" Little did he know that at the same moment Eon considered him, the Governor of Olmutz, the world's biggest fool. Nevertheless, Eon was worried at the thought of being searched by some lady's maid, who might go too far, and he was scheming how to undress and get into bed so that his clothes might be searched while he was not in them when the Governor went on: "Yes indeed, Madame, I am afraid it is necessary that I should have you searched, as discreetly as possible, of course . . . but I am afraid I have to do something worse—much worse—than that. I beg you to believe me that I have absolutely no choice in the matter—my orders are imperative—I am most distressed."

"But what is all this, Monsieur le Gouverneur?"

"Alas, Madame, I hardly know how to tell you." He made a formal bow. "I must satisfy myself of your real sex."

On that the room echoed to the gayest laugh imaginable. "Oh, if that's all," said Eon. But in his own mind he thought, "This time I'm really lost."

Just then a door opened and a woman of about forty—much younger than the Governor—came in with a great rustling of petticoats.

"H'm," said the Governor, "I must tell you, Madame, that I am occupied . . . with affairs of state. . . ."

Eon had turned and made a curtsy which the person who had just come in returned with great politeness.

"I heard everything," said the lady. "As for affairs of state, Monsieur, I know as much about them as you do." And turning to Eon she continued, "I have the honour to be the wife of Monsieur le Gouverneur."

"H'm," said the Governor again. "I beg you, Madame . . ."

"Monsieur," said his wife gravely, "just because your Chotek makes a fool of himself, and such an obvious and petty-minded fool that he is likely to bring your name into ridicule for ever—just because of that there is no need for you to do the same."

"But, Madame . . ."

"I won't have you handing over this young lady to be pawed about by a serving-wench. Where do you propose to put her, may I ask? In a cell?"

"God forbid!" said the Governor. "She will stay here in our own lodging."

"Quite right, too! Very well, to-night when she has retired, I will get into bed with her. A little tact, Monsieur, is required, tact and decency."

The Governor smiled all over his fat face and stroked his moustache.

"Very well, Madame. That puts everything in order."

Eon smiled and expressed his gratitude and tried to look delighted. But in his own mind he was cursing, "Another woman to be dealt with." The honourable Mme Governor was of a nice plumpness, a florid complexion and a lively eye. "Just

the type," said the Chevalier to himself, "of that Grand Duchess at Strelitz who was wicked enough to catch me by hiding in her daughter's bed, so that I had to treat her roughly to prevent her from talking. It seems I am fated to have to deal with German geese. But this time I swear I will not touch the woman."

Outside in the hall the Governor's voice could be heard. He was shouting, "Monsieur Chotek, you are a fool!"

While he was undressing, Eon thought over the position. He felt sure that Korfanty and Mme de Rochefort had followed him at a discreet distance. They should be in Olmutz by now, quite close to him, and they were probably calculating the height of the citadel walls. Would he have to wait for them and face being confronted with the Governor's wife at any moment? The Governor's lodging was right in the middle of the fortress, and when he looked out of his window he could see a sentry pacing the courtyard. He remembered that he had entered over a drawbridge, which must now be raised. He had no doubt that the heavy iron-bound door which he could see in the distance barred the way to the drawbridge. The door was formidable enough in itself, and beyond it he had a glimpse of the crossed bars of a lowered portcullis. In fact, the courtyard was a trap closed on all sides. To try to escape through the window would lead inevitably to arrest. And this fool of a German woman would be with him at any moment.

While Eon was thus meditating, two gentlemen rode up the approach to the castle with three servants behind them. One of them, Count Korfanty, stayed at the foot of the ramp with one servant holding the horses. The other, with two servants in attendance—these were of course, Mme de Rochefort, Heart's Delight and Bragard—shouted across the moat, demanding to speak with the Governor. Never in human memory had such a thing happened before, once the drawbridge had been raised, but the mere fact that the whole business was so unheard of intrigued the Governor, and he went down to the door and parleyed with them across the moat. Behind him Chotek and his soldiers were drawn up ready to repulse any attack.

"Are you not looking for the Chevalier d'Eon?" asked the Countess in a loud voice. "I am he!"

The Governor raised his arms in the air. The person who hailed him was on horseback.

"I will give myself up on one condition," went on the same clear voice. "And that is that you set free the person whom you have so unjustly arrested."

The Governor looked at Chotek. Poor Chotek had been half-dead since he made the arrest; he felt that he had made the greatest mistake of his life. He bent towards the Governor. "Look, Monsieur le Gouverneur, you have evidently got hold of the mistress of the man you are looking for. And he would rather give himself up than leave his friend in prison."

"Damn it!" grumbled the Governor. "Don't you see that the person who is speaking to us is dressed as a man?"

"Yes, I see that, but your orders, Monsieur le Gouverneur, do not say 'a woman,' but a 'captain of dragoons who has the habit of dressing as a woman.' For the moment he appears as the captain of dragoons."

Von Mulhausen twisted his moustache. Mme de Rochefort raised her voice again. "You are probably surprised to see me dressed as a man, Monsieur, but one cannot go about all the time in disguise."

"Lower the drawbridge!" shouted the Governor.

## CHAPTER XX

# Escape

MEANWHILE THE Baroness had come rushing into the room to which Eon had been shown, wishing to know whether she should send him her lady's maid. But Eon said that he preferred to undress alone. "What a wretched business," he said to himself. "Here I am compelled by Fate to betray my beloved once again! But there's no choice. I shall ask her forgiveness all the while and I'll get the business over as quickly as maybe without any unnecessary kissing and cuddling. To think that I must serve the pleasure of this blowsy German when my divine Rochefort is just outside the walls."

He opened the window gently to see if there was any possible means of escaping his fate, but obviously it would be the height of folly to jump out and risk his neck. A lesser man would have given way to despair, but Eon was not of the temperament which ever admits defeat. He finished undressing, cursing all the time, slipped into bed and called out in his sweetest voice, "Here I am, Madame."

Thereupon the Baroness entered in an amazing nightdress, all frills and pink ribands, with her great head hidden under the most roguish of lace caps. It was her way of demonstrating beyond argument that even if Olmutz was not Paris, it was still a place where people knew their manners and could dress themselves properly for the night.

"Well, come along!" she said coquettishly. "Make room for me, my young friend."

Eon huddled at the edge of the bed, closing his eyes. And at that moment a bell rang. "Good heavens!" cried the Baroness, with a start. "The bell! Someone at this time of night? It's unheard-of!"

For this bell rang at any time of the day and night when a stranger came into the citadel. So the Baroness, instead of hastening into bed, rushed to the window and with her eyes

glued to the panes she tried to make out something in the darkness. Eon did his best to stimulate her curiosity. "Good Heavens, Madame! It is probably some great Prince!"

"Oh no, my dear child, I don't think it would be a prince, but all the same it must be an important person, for I see the portcullis being raised, and there is my husband the Baron von Mulhausen in person waiting to receive the newcomers. Good Lord, who can it be? I would give anything to know. Anna," she shouted to her maid, "go and see who it is and come back and tell us straight away."

Then she turned to the bed, and with the satisfied chuckle of a woman who has dined well and loves her bed, she thrust herself up against Eon.

"Aha!" she said. "Now we shall find out all about it at last!"

"Madame," murmured Eon, "spare my blushes, I beg you, and give me room to breathe."

But the Baroness was a hearty wench, without any reticence in her nature, and she pawed the Chevalier all over with enthusiasm till he was driven back on his last defences. He had just made up his mind to fall on the woman without more ado and shut her mouth with a kiss when there came a violent hammering on the door. They could hear Anna's voice, but it was drowned by the loud and urgent shouts of the Baron, who cried, "Madame, get the young lady dressed at once. I must see her immediately."

The Baroness jumped out of bed, and a loud and heated discussion went on through the door, each party shouting the other down, she asking questions and he refusing to answer them. While this was going on Eon slipped out at the foot of the bed, hurried into his stockings and petticoats and was almost completely dressed, except for the hair hanging down his back, when the Baroness turned round and exclaimed, "What—dressed already! My dear child, I was just coming to help you. Ah, how right my first impression was. Captain of dragoons, indeed! As if a captain of dragoons could be as pretty and as charming as that, with such a soft skin and such lovely hair!"

Five minutes later Eon's hair was caught up, put in order and covered by his head-dress. Then the Baron was admitted to the room and after excusing himself repeatedly and kissing his



guest's beautiful hands, he explained, "The Chevalier we are looking for is down at the gate and he will come into the citadel as soon as you leave it, Madame."

"Good!" said Eon to himself. "That will be Mme de Rochefort."

"Indeed he says," went on the Baron, "that he is willing to give himself up, but solely on condition that you are set free without any further delay. He does not wish you to suffer even one hour more. May I be allowed to see in this, Madame, a charming, a truly charming proof of the power of love?" And the Baron rolled his enormous eyes and twisted his old soldier's face up in such a way that his mouth looked like that of a pouting child.

"Dear little girl," sighed the Baroness.

"I hope you will tell the Chevalier yourself, Madame," added the Baron, "that you have not been badly treated."

The Baroness, however much she may have wished to do so, could not go down in her nightgown. She had to be content with a prolonged and affectionate exchange of kisses. Then the Baron took Eon away from her and led him across the courtyard. They found Chotek and several soldiers at the gateway and were saluted by them. The portcullis had already been raised, and Mme de Rochefort, dressed as a man, was standing at the far end of the drawbridge, which had just been lowered. Behind, one could make out a small group: the Count (who was not anxious to let himself be seen at close quarters) and the three servants who were holding the horses. Chotek, as a measure of precaution, had sent down four of his men to surround Mme de Rochefort, although she had not yet set foot on the drawbridge. Another score of soldiers were lined up under the main gateway. Mme de Rochefort was holding her sword in a very peculiar way by the blade as if she was preparing to surrender it. When she saw Eon she stepped forward and came halfway across the bridge to meet him. "Ah, good day, Chevalier," said Eon, going towards her as if to embrace her.

What happened then had all the qualities of a nightmare for the Germans who took part in it. Eon seized the sword and hurled himself on his enemies. Chotek was the first to be wounded; Eon could not forgive the wretched man for having

tried to take advantage of their drive together by attempting to fondle him; it was true, of course, that he had boxed the man's ears, but that seemed to him altogether too nice a punishment. Now he ran him right through the body and Chotek collapsed on the planks of the bridge. Two soldiers were put out of action in the next five seconds and as for the Baron, he saw the flash of the sword so near to his face that he stepped backwards, lost his footing and fell into the moat. By this time the other soldiers came running up, drawing their swords and fixing their bayonets; but at the same moment Heart's Delight and Bragard rushed to the scene from the other side, each armed with a brace of pistols, all four of which they fired into the enemy ranks. Then they drew their swords and charged. Three or four men had fallen already; the rest, faced with three swordsmen, turned and fled. Eon and the two servants, carried away by the excitement, were pursuing them when there came a warning shout from behind them, "The bridge! Look out for the bridge!"

A few soldiers, partly out of cunning and partly out of fear, had laid hold of the chains and begun to raise the drawbridge. The three men jumped clear just in time and found themselves in safety while the soldiers were still laughing triumphantly at the thought that they had trapped them. Then, there was an outburst of shots; the guard were firing more or less at random, while from the moat came the despairing cries of the Baron von Mulhausen.

Count Korfanty was waiting with Koloman. Everyone mounted at once and cleared the town at a brisk gallop.

"We have a long way to go," said Eon. "The best plan will be to press ahead as fast as we can, as long as our horses will carry us. When they founder . . ."

"I will get fresh ones," broke in the Count gloomily. "I have friends in the Empire. I will be responsible for finding you horses until we reach the Bavarian frontier." And he threw a black look at Eon.

So they rode on their way, making good speed, for Mme de Rochefort's training in the hunting field at the Court of Louis XV had made a wonderful horsewoman of her. She affected not to notice the frigid politeness of her two friends to one another,

and every now and then she gossiped lightheartedly of Versailles and elsewhere. Eon and she had exchanged clothes again and the first day they covered more than fifty miles with only one change of horses. At night they were too exhausted to do more than tumble into bed and fall asleep at once.

Meanwhile, Lord Ferrers and his good lady, still arguing furiously about Eon's sex, had arrived at Olmutz and been horrified to discover what had happened there. They came, after a heavy dinner at the local inn, just in time to see the Governor, having been rescued from the moat, filthy and vociferous; Chotek and another man were lying dead and four of the soldiers were wounded. But Lord Ferrers was a man of action; he sized up the situation and took charge of it himself—for the Governor was clearly incapable of doing so. After a short argument, he persuaded the Governor to ride at once with him and a small escort to report matters to Vienna; but all his efforts to shake off Lady Ferrers were in vain; the intrepid lady insisted on going with them.

The uproar they caused on their arrival at Vienna two days later can scarcely be imagined. That a man taken under arrest to the citadel of Olmutz should have been able to escape was an unheard-of scandal. What, asked the Chancellery, can be the matter with Baron von Mulhausen, who up to now has been so faithful a servant of the Empress? Lord Ferrers raised heaven and earth, and it was decided to search the whole countryside and above all to send courier after courier to Linz (which must be made secure against all possibilities) and to Passau, the frontier town, warning the local authorities to arrest any suspect at once. Lord Ferrers was given twenty Croat cavalymen with an officer to relieve the Baron's men. It was thought that this number was enough to be able to deal with the fugitives if they caught up with them and not too great to be able to find fresh horses at the Imperial posting stations.

As Eon and his friends had circled round Vienna and rejoined the main road to Linz ten or twelve miles to the east of the city, the Croats, who had fast horses and enjoyed the Imperial posting facilities, made up almost all the start which the Chevalier and his party had gained on them.

Towards the end of the third day the fugitives saw before

them the town of Linz. It is a charming town, but the road to Passau goes straight through the middle of it, and there is no way round. Even in the distance, for there was still daylight, they could see that, though the drawbridge was down and the gate was open, there was the equivalent of a company of infantry drawn up in front of them, guarding the moat.

"They know the whole story here," groaned Eon. And he was right. The couriers, riding full speed day and night, had easily outdistanced him and his friends. Lord Ferrers had advised the Governor simply to shut the western gate and let the fugitives walk into the trap. But that over-conscientious functionary had insisted in mustering his company of troops, and thereby Eon was put on his guard.

The fugitives held a short council of war without dismounting. "I do not want," said Eon, "to drag anyone else into my troubles. So I suggest that you, Monsieur, and you, Madame, should go on with the Count's servant. Mme de Rochefort's passport is in order and you are well-known, my dear Count, so you will get by without any difficulty. It will seem quite natural that you should escort your relation to the frontier, and even that you should hire a postchaise for her in Linz. I ask you to go slowly into the town and to dine at the most luxurious inn. But only stay long enough to put the horses in. We shall leave our horses with you, and they should be brought outside the town with the postchaise, as quickly as possible. Of course, Madame will take charge of my precious letter again. As for Heart's Delight, Bragard and myself, we have good arms and stout hearts, and we will get ourselves out of the difficulty in some way or other."

A moment later Eon and his two faithful followers were alone beside the road. Night was coming on.

## CHAPTER XXI

# The Nearer the Church . . .

FROM BEHIND A screen of trees Eon and his two men watched the people passing along the road. There were a few citizens coming back from their country houses, some hawkers with their barrows, a few labourers, tired after the day's work. No one was coming from Linz; everyone was on their way back to it. The town was covered with a light cloud of smoke—all the housewives were either preparing or were already at their evening meal, and most good folk, behind closed doors were relaxing themselves at their hearths before going to their comfortable, warm beds.

Heart's Delight sighed, "How I wish I were an honest burgher of Linz!"

"What, to stay in this hole all your life without even knowing where the blue water of the Danube goes? You would very soon break your chains, I can tell you."

They began to laugh, when suddenly Eon signed to them to be quiet. Down the road in the distance came two Capuchin monks. They were bearded to the eyes and had their beggar's wallets slung from their shoulders. They evidently belonged to some monastery in the town and were making their way wearily back to it, like a couple of foundered beasts.

"The Lord has sent them to us," said Eon.

"Their wallets look well stuffed," commented Bragard, and Heart's Delight added, "That means a nice dinner for us."

Eon drew the two men close to him and sketched his plan in a few words. The two old campaigners needed no long explanation to grasp the point and moves of the attack. In a few seconds Heart's Delight had turned himself into a very convincing cripple by tying his ankle to his thigh, while Bragard, by slipping his left arm under his coat, putting a bandage on his left eye and half-closing the other, presented a picture of a one-armed man who was also one-eyed and likely at any moment

to be totally blind. Both of them made themselves look as dishevelled as possible and they took off their boots and rubbed their feet in the dust. Then they planted themselves at the corner of the road, out of sight of the town, and stood there looking supremely wretched.

When the two monks came up Bragard cried out in a lamentable whine: "*Caridad! Caridad!*" while Heart's Delight wagged his head and slobbered like an idiot.

"They must be Spanish beggars or gipsies," said one of the monks.

"Chicken-thieves, you mean," corrected the other austerely.

"*Al nomen da Dios, Caridad!*" cried Bragard again.

The older of the two monks went closer to them. "Are you hungry?" he asked. Heart's Delight belched out some meaningless sounds and shook his head like a vicious horse. The monk pulled his wallet round on to his stomach and took out of it two crusts of bread, which he held out to the pair. But, at the moment he did this, Bragard and Heart's Delight suddenly resumed their normal shape; the cripple now had both his legs, the one-armed man had both his arms and both his eyes; each of them held a pistol in either hand, and Bragard hissed in his bad German, "Go to the right, into the wood, or you're dead men."

He would have been understood just as well if he had spoken in French, for the language of pistols is international. A moment later the two monks were in the wood, with their wallets on the ground. Then, albeit with bad grace, they allowed themselves to be stripped of their habits and their sandals. In answer to questions, they described the position of their monastery, which was not only at the other end of the town, but, by lucky chance, outside the walls. The next step was to tie them up and gag them, during which process they received a few kicks in the ribs for good measure, and the two servants were already looking hungrily at the wallets when Eon gave a low whistle.

Round the bend in the road came a priest mounted on a mule. He seemed to be one of those priests who are also men of the world and who only want a sword to become cavaliers. Very elegant he was in his big silk-lined cloak and his little black three-cornered hat, and he was spurring on his mount, being

anxious no doubt not to be late for dinner with the Bishop. At a sign from Eon, the two servants, now turned monks, began to make ribald jokes at the expense of their master and even to abuse him, until he ran off towards the man on the mule as if to escape their rough usage, while they themselves made off towards the town.

All this, of course, had been seen by the priest, whom when Eon approached him stopped his mule and saluted him most politely. "Please excuse me, Your Reverence, for stopping you like this, but . . ." He threw a frightened glance towards the monks, who were hurrying away with their wallets humped on their rounded backs. Then, as the priest began to question him benevolently in German, Eon shut his eyes and took hold of the mule's saddle. "I am afraid I am going to be ill . . ." he said in French.

Suddenly, with his lovely golden hair, he looked so much like a young girl in disguise that the priest, still holding his hat in his hand, permitted himself to ask in Latin, with an air of bewilderment, "Good Heavens, but who are you really?"

"I am the most unhappy of women," answered Eon in the same language, his eyes filling with tears.

"My God!" cried the priest, dismounting hastily. "Madame, allow me . . ."

"Ah, please excuse me, reverend sir," said Eon. "I feel better now," and with an appealing gesture he asked, "Is it so very obvious that I am a woman?"

The priest bowed with a smile as if to suggest that for his part he had not been deceived for a moment. Then he muttered, stumbling over his Latin words, "But how has all this come about?"

"Oh," sighed Eon, "that is a long story."

"And you are a scholar as well as everything else," remarked the priest.

Eon seemed to have recovered from his weakness. He smiled. "I had an uncle who was a priest," he said with a curtsy which completed the undoing of the reverend gentleman. But I don't want to be a nuisance to you, Father. I ran to you because those two wretched monks were insulting me. Alas! Perhaps they recognized me for what I am."

"Scandalous," cried the priest. "I shall go and see their Superior to-morrow and have them whipped."

"Allow me to thank you for your help. I hope to take shelter in the first inn I come to."

"Don't think of it, Madame! The fact that you are dressed as a man makes it possible for me to go into the town with you on my arm, and I shall not leave you until I have personally seen you accommodated at the Mouton Couronné, the best inn we have in Linz."

Eon poured out a flood of thanks, accompanied by such a smile that the priest thought to himself, "What the devil would Mme Gertrude"—his landlady, who had a certain tenderness for him—"say if she saw this. Devil take me, this is a most delightful adventure."

And, as he pressed the Chevalier's well-rounded arms against him, he felt himself very deeply in love.

Going through the great east gate of Linz, the Reverend Father Egon von Brausch, Vicar-General of the Bishop, was respectfully saluted by the soldiers of the watch. He was giving his arm to a young gentleman about whom there was nothing remarkable except that he seemed to be ill. Although this gentleman was a stranger, the fact that he was in such company removed all suspicion from him. Just inside the town, a humble member of the priest's flock took his mule from him and the two men went forward on foot, with the Chevalier leaning on the priest's arm, to the inn of the Mouton Couronné.

As for the two Capuchins, they had already passed through the town, unnoticed in their monkish attire, and had found the rest of the party at the first small wineshop outside the western gate.

As Eon and his new friend went up the staircase of the inn the landlord ran after them and held a lively conversation with the priest, who turned to Eon and said happily, "You are sure to get a good dinner. Two English have just arrived, a milord and his wife, and he asked for a turkey which he had seen in the yard. They will never be able to eat it all themselves, and the innkeeper tells me he will keep a nice portion for you. Take heart, Madame," he added with an impassioned glance. "You are in good hands."



He kissed the tips of Eon's fingers and went off to dine with the Archbishop, promising to come back later.

Left to himself, Eon reflected on the unpleasant news that Lord Ferrers and his wife were in Linz. They had obviously come at full speed and with considerable forces behind them. Eon realized that he was in a trap and that if he did not quickly escape from it his life was worth very little. His only hope lay in the fact that his presence was unknown to his pursuers, and he prayed that the innkeeper was not too talkative. He listened for a long time without hearing anything, but at last two people came into the room next door and started talking in English. Eon did not understand a word, but the language told him all that he wanted to know, and in any case he recognized their voices.

He dined in his own room off a wing of the turkey and a glass of wine, saying that he wanted nothing more. Shortly afterwards the priest came back carrying the clothes of a woman of those parts, discreetly wrapped up in a bundle of cloth. He seemed to be very much upset.

"I don't know what is going on," he said in Latin. "There is a sentry at the door of every inn and the whole garrison is on the alert. Do you suppose these English, who I swear are heretics, have anything to do with it?"

"I am sure they have," said Eon. "They look exactly like spies."

The priest went into the corner of the room and turned his back while Eon changed his clothes, and when he was allowed to look he saw a delightful Austrian girl standing before him. He gave a languishing sigh, but his attempt to come closer was repulsed with determination. "How impossible it is to hide one's sex," he cried. "God does His work of creation thoroughly!"

"How well I know it," answered Eon. "And now once again I must thank you for your courtesy."

The priest threw himself at his feet. "I adore you and I want no other occupation henceforth but to serve you and please you."

Eon let him take his hand and arm, and even let him kiss his cheek. "You fool," he thought. "If you only knew what

you were really being used for!" And all the time he kept gazing ardently at him. But any more intimate approach he would not tolerate, and the priest thought that in spite of the promising look in her eyes, this girl was really a dragon of virtue.

"May I dare to hope," he sighed, "that you will not always be cruel to your slave?"

"What would I not give to him who saved me!" answered the Chevalier. "It only rests with you to make yourself happy, but not in this inn."

The priest swallowed the bait eagerly. "I know," he said, "a widow with two daughters who manages to be both worldly and devout at the same time. In her house there would be no difficulty in your receiving me in your room. It is quite acceptable, as these ladies have the highest possible reputation. Will you do me the honour?"

"This very night," said Eon. "Provided," he added with a blush, "that the proprieties are respected." The priest swore they should be.

A moment later they went down together and crossed the dining-room. The host had already gone to bed and only a woman-servant gaped at them as they passed. But in a corner of the room Lord Ferrers sat alone with his feet stretched out to the fire, drinking a glass of brandy. "This is the critical moment," thought Eon, hiding his face behind the priest's shoulder. And as they were just going through the door the Englishman turned round and leapt to his feet. "Upon my word," he muttered, "I know that figure. . . ."

But the door closed behind them and Lord Ferrers passed his hand over his forehead and went back to his brandy with a groan. But he sat staring in front of him unable to get the idea out of his head. Just then his wife called to him, "Are you ever coming to bed, sir? You are keeping the whole dining-room lit up just for yourself."

"Well, the fact is," confessed the Englishman, "I thought I saw our man walk through here."

"Our woman, you mean."

Lord Ferrers shrugged his shoulders, "In either case the creature we are trying to catch."

"Here, in the room with you? You have been dreaming, sir. Yes, dreaming." And she laughed loudly.

The von Gruchen ladies had a house at the end of a large garden right against the ramparts. As it was a long time since there had been a siege of Linz, a number of houses had been built against the walls, and often right over them, so that the sentry-walk served them as a terrace. The von Gruchen house was one of these. The lady was the widow of an officer who died while still serving without having risen to a higher rank than major. She lived with her two daughters in this big lonely house and sometimes took in a young woman or a widow as a paying guest. She would also arrange a rendezvous if suitably rewarded. Her daughters, who were in a hurry to get married, however they did it, carried on intrigues with the officers of the garrison. In fact, Father Egon von Brausch was risking a great deal, including his chances of a bishopric, in compromising himself in this way in Frau von Gruchen's house. But passion explains if it does not excuse the most flagrant imprudence.

So he reasoned with himself as he hurried along at midnight with the key of the little garden gate in his pocket. The night was black and the town was unusually noisy, echoing with the stamp of innumerable patrols. Two of these had stopped the good father, flashed their lanterns in his face and made him give his name. This arbitrary behaviour had annoyed him excessively, for he had had to make up long stories of sick people needing to be visited at this unreasonable hour, and he had heard stifled sniggers behind his back.

He had to waste at least another ten minutes listening to Frau von Gruchen singing the praises of Mlle de Beaumont, whose grace and charm had completely won her heart in the short space of two hours. Midnight had already struck before the priest could get away from the chatterbox and knock at long last on his beloved's door.

A few minutes before this a curious thing had happened on the ramparts. The grenadier on sentry-go outside the house, just as he passed under Mlle de Beaumont's window, had hummed very softly the refrain so popular among Louis XV's troops in Holland:

*Dites-moi donc, la belle,  
Où est votre mari?*

As he did not actually sing the words no one could tell whether the man who was humming was French or German. But Eon was struck by the tune, which seemed too French to be likely to be heard in Linz. He opened the window. "*Wer da?*" he asked in a low voice. The grenadier went on pacing up and down; he made no answer to the question thrown at him in German by a woman leaning out of her window.

"Who goes there?" Eon repeated in French, and the man came closer at once.

"Heart's Delight, at your service," he answered.

Eon guessed that the others were waiting somewhere below the walls and that the Imperial grenadier whose uniform Heart's Delight was wearing was no longer a live soldier. In a few whispered words the servant confirmed his guess. But their low-voiced conversation was interrupted almost at once by a knock at the door, and in came the reverend gentleman with an armful of sweetmeats—which, by the way, were quite superfluous, for there was already a bottle of hock and a cold meal on a little table. Eon as soon as he saw him, raised his arms to Heaven.

"My God! A priest! No, no, no, that will never do. It is like a funeral. You must not come here dressed like that!" The priest could only gape at him. "Such a thing is not done," repeated Eon, stamping his foot like any pretty woman in a temper. "Not in black!"

"Very well. I understand," said the priest submissively. "I'll be back again in ten minutes or so."

At that very moment, in her bedroom at the Mouton Couronné, Lady Ferrers was getting quietly out of bed. "Certainly," she reflected, "diplomacy and politics ought to be left to women to manage. Lord Ferrers thought he had seen the Chevalier, and now I know that he certainly did see him somewhere about the hotel. For he is here. This fugitive who keeps disappearing while the whole of Austria is hunting for him is here, and I know where he is. Two minutes' talk with

the innkeeper and the expenditure of a guinea were all that was needed. He is there, next-door to us."

Lady Ferrers listened for a moment to her husband snoring in the adjoining room, and shivered a little. She was taking a great risk. Supposing they came that very night to arrest the Chevalier? But no, they were too silly for that. Her hand was already on the door handle, and with a beating heart she turned it slowly. The door was not bolted. By now she was trembling in joyful anticipation of the pleasure to come. She would creep up, stretch out her hands and seize hold of the young man; without a word, she would close his mouth with a kiss. She went forward on tiptoe in the dark. How quietly he was breathing; she could not hear a sound. Suddenly her hand touched the bed; she felt the pillow and the quilt. Horror! The bed was empty—yes, completely empty. In a fit of rage she fell on it, biting the pillow and twisting the sheets. Had the innkeeper given her away? What a fool she had been! My God, what a fool! Like the conventional Englishwoman that she was, she had waited till all was dark and everyone in the inn asleep, and now the bird was flown.

Suddenly she saw the whole thing clearly. That fool of a priest of whom the innkeeper had spoken had let himself be tricked like so many others before him. And no doubt by now the Chevalier was outside the walls and in the arms of some other woman, probably Mme de Rochefort. Lady Ferrers was swept by a frenzy of rage. "Very well, then," she said to herself, "since he doesn't want me, he shan't have anyone else. If he wants to be hanged, hanged he shall be." She knew she was being unjust, but thwarted passion excuses everything. She started to feel her way out of the room, and in her frenzy she despaired of ever finding the door. At last, however, she reached it and, choking down her sobs, she rushed to bang violently on her husband's door.

A moment later Lord Ferrers opened it in his nightgown with a candle in his hand.

"Man or woman," she said, "do you know where the person we are looking for has been?"

Lord Ferrers, still half-asleep, shook his head in silence.

"Here, sir—here, two steps away from you and m

now a servant-girl whom I managed to bribe has come to tell me that he is there no longer. Do you hear me? He is gone!

"It is the Devil," said Lord Ferrers.

"There, at last, is something we can agree on," moaned his wife. "A devil, sir, a devil!"

## CHAPTER XXII

# Farewell to the Empress

LORD FERRERS WAS not in the least worried at the prospect of compromising the reverend secretary of the Archbishop. Dressing hurriedly, he had the whole household in an uproar. Then he rushed out, and ten minutes later was knocking at the Governor's door. As soon as this functionary could be roused, orders began to fly in every direction. Police dragged the host of the Mouton Couronné from his bed and questioned him under threat of every form of violence; the Archbishop's household was turned upside down, and aides-de-camp rushed to all the barracks. The man was there, somewhere inside the walls, but where? The sentries must be doubled and tripled. The little town echoed to the sound of mounted patrols frenziedly galloping. Heart's Delight, in the uniform of an Imperial grenadier, heard all this going on, and it did not make him feel any happier. After all, there he was in a stolen uniform with a corpse at his feet, the corpse of the man from which he had taken his uniform. He knew that in a little while the sergeant would come along to change the sentries. Must he kill the sergeant as well? But a sergeant relieving sentries takes four men with him, and even Heart's Delight felt that odds of five to one were excessive. But what was he to do? It would not be difficult to get rid of the corpse; that could be thrown to the foot of the wall. But if it was discovered in the morning under the window of the house where Eon was hiding there would be an enquiry which would lead to the Chevalier himself being found. No; he must get his master out of the place, and that as quickly as possible. But since he had shut the window Eon had given no further sign of life.

Meanwhile the priest had gone back to his own room and changed into night attire which he had donned with loving care; wearing this, he flattered himself that he was irresistible. It consisted of slippers, a pair of white drawers and a little

cambric vest with lace frills and his arms embroidered over his heart! Eon, in his room, had stripped off all his feminine clothes and was as naked as the day he was born. Then he took a bolster and laid it in his bed, hoping that the priest would think at first that some sort of joke was being played on him. After that he went out into the passage. There was a cupboard in such a position beside the door of his room that the priest would not come past it. Eon pressed himself against this and waited. He had to wait for a good five minutes and he was shivering with cold when he heard a door creak. His Reverence slunk along the passage like a wolf and took hold of the door handle without noticing that the key was in the lock on the passage side. He opened the door; the room was dark . . . which the good man put down to the maidenly modesty of his prey. And as he felt his way on tiptoe towards the bed the key turned noiselessly in the lock behind him. The fox was trapped in the chicken run.

The reverend gentleman, after banging against various bits of furniture, finally reached the bed and found the bolster. He thought this was quite an amusing joke and began to utter affectionate little scolding cries. "Darling, where are you? Oh, you silly child! Now, will you stop hiding yourself?"

Finally, he fell into a rage and, realizing at last that she was not there, rushed to the door and found himself caught like a rat in a trap. Then he began to hammer on the door and shout, without worrying about the widow von Gruchen, who indeed was quite accustomed to scenes of this kind.

All this Eon's imagination could easily picture, and he wasted no time listening or thinking about it. He had run to the priest's room and dressed himself as fast as he could in His Reverence's clothes, complete to the last detail, with hat and breviary to match. Then he opened the window and called, "Heart's Delight!" The servant came at once to the window and urged his master to make the nine-foot jump on to the rampart. Eon nearly fell over the edge as he landed, but Heart's Delight caught him just in time. Then he threw the grenadier's corpse over, with a warning shout, and after that he threw down the pack with his own belongings in it. His whistle was answered from below, where the snorting of horses could be heard. Eon



took hold of the rope which Heart's Delight pointed out to him, and began to climb down it. In three minutes he was on the ground. Just at that moment a window opened and a man in a nightshirt appeared at it, backed by Fraü von Gruchen in a state of great distress, Lord Ferrers and some armed soldiers.

"Grenadier," he shouted, "Grenadier! Sound the alert!" And Lord Ferrers echoed the cry. As the sergeant came running towards them the priest stretched out his arm towards the horizon, "That is where he went—that way!" he shouted.

But Heart's Delight broke in, "You want a Grenadier—very well, here I am; but a grenadier of the King of France!" And putting his musket to his shoulder he shot down the sergeant. Then, dropping the musket, he pulled a pistol from under his coat and fired at the priest, shouting, "You have my blessing . . ." The wretched man got the bullet right in his jaw and fell over backwards.

"By St. George," yelled Lord Ferrers. "It's the servant from St. Petersburg!" And he in turn drew a pistol from his pocket and fired. The bullet passed through the hat of Heart's Delight, but he only laughed and began to climb down his rope.

"The gates! To the gates!" shouted Lord Ferrers.

From down below came the song:

*"Dites-moi donc, la belle,  
Où est votre mari?"*

This time first one laughing voice and then another joined in, and there was even one woman's voice. It was, of course, Mme de Rochefort's, but it gave Lord Ferrers an anxious moment. "Good God!" he said. "They have a woman with them. Am I going to lose my bet?"

Immediately after this a strange cavalcade rode away from the walls of Linz at full speed, to the astonishment of those few who set eyes on it. One of the party was a woman, one a priest, a third a heavily moustachioed Hungarian nobleman, then came an Imperial grenadier and, lastly, two servants. Thus they galloped through the night. At the end of two hours Eon leaned towards the Count. "Do you suppose, Monsieur," he asked, "that there is a party pursuing us?"

"At least a regiment," was the answer. "To be precise, the Empress's Dragoons, who are quartered in Linz."

"In other words, we are lost?"

"So I think, Monsieur."

"Is there no bridge on the way?" asked Eon.

"There is one bridge over the Danube about halfway from here to Passau—say about thirty miles on. It could be defended."

"An excellent idea," said Eon.

"All the same, Monsieur la Chevalier, you should bear in mind that there are other regiments behind this one, and that five men and one woman cannot hold off the whole forces of Her Imperial Majesty for very long."

"Never mind," said Eon. "We must hold on for a few hours, till the morning. Anything may happen during the night."

"Then I had better tell you something else. The bridge is a wooden one."

"Then it can be burned?"

"Quite so."

"We must set fire to it."

"Very well, let us set fire to it, but my head is at stake."

That was the end of the discussion, for they had to watch their horses too closely to allow them to go on talking. One fall would have been fatal. The hours went by and they reckoned that their pursuers would be about an hour behind them. Ten miles or so from Linz they woke up the postmaster and changed horses. Then under the man's horrified eyes they killed those they had been riding. They repeated this performance twice more, the only difference being that at the last stage the postmaster tried to restrain them by force and was himself shot down among the bodies of his horses. After that they could relax a little. There is no cavalry regiment which on a long journey covers more than five or six miles an hour, and no colonel so mad as to make his horses gallop twenty-five miles at a stretch. They need only fear an advance guard of eight or ten men, and those would not be able to find fresh horses.

Just after daybreak, from the top of a little hill, they saw the bridge and on the road ahead of them was a wagon loaded with logs and brushwood.

"Exactly what we want!" cried Eon.

They let the man drive on to the bridge and pay the toll-keeper. Then they pushed the latter back politely, but at pistol point, into his hut, unharnessed the horses and turned over the wagon. In a few minutes a wonderful pyre was raised above the Danube and soon the whole valley was brilliantly lit up by the blazing bonfire.

As they rode on at full speed the bells began to ring in all the steeples, and they saw the peasants rushing down the neighbouring slopes to the scene of the disaster. But it was too late; the whole platform of the bridge was ablaze. As they passed through the village they raised the alarm themselves and denounced the rash wagon-driver while they changed horses. They were easy in their minds now. It was true they had still some thirty-five miles to go, but they could do this in the daytime after sleeping for an hour or two and hiring a postchaise for Mme de Rochefort, who was obviously tiring.

So the day passed without their having any reason to feel that they were being closely pressed. They knew that there were some bad roads also leading to Passau on the other bank of the river, but the two men did not think that it would be possible for anyone to go quicker that way than they could go on the good road down which they were galloping.

But in the evening when they had just caught sight of Passau with its slender spires and its high ramparts (for as a frontier post it was much more strongly fortified than Linz) they came across two scouts who withdrew rapidly when they sighted them. And, following them at a discreet distance, they suddenly saw an astonishing thing; drawn up before them was a whole small army.

"All our trouble has served no purpose," said Eon.

"Except to ensure that I am beheaded if we are caught," added the Count.

Mme de Rochefort, seeing that the two men were really in despair this time, said with a smile, "Come, Messieurs, do you need a woman to hearten you? We have seen worse than this."

In face of her smiling courage, the two men, even if they did not feel it, pretended to take new heart. But indeed both of

them thought the situation hopeless. There were not less than three thousand men disposed on both sides of the road and in front of the city walls, and as well as infantry there were cavalry and artillery. They left the postchaise by the roadside; Mme de Rochefort, still smiling bravely, got back into the saddle and they took to the woods.

"If the cavalry take a hand in it, we are lost," said the Count. "Some scout, pushing his horses to death, must have got here before us by the left bank while we were on the right. There is no doubt they are waiting for us at the bridge."

There could be no question of trying to force their way through. They turned off towards the right, riding in single file along a forest track, when suddenly they heard the sound of a horn in the distance. "A hunt!" said Eon, and Mme de Rochefort murmured: "And we are the quarry!"

Just as they reached a clearing in the forest a fine ten-pointer stag burst through the undergrowth in front of them. It had shaken off the pack, except for two hounds who were following close on its heels, while the whips could be heard calling them back. The stag went down the hill at full speed in the opposite direction from Passau.

"He is leading us into Bavaria, as God is my witness," cried Eon. And the two men with Mme de Rochefort between them forgot everything else in their enthusiasm for the chase and began to gallop after the beast down a sunken road. Suddenly they heard shouts and saw the whole pack with the whips and the huntsmen heading off the stag, which turned further still towards the north. Eon and his friends immediately drew aside and saluted, but a stout gentleman, short in the stirrups, came up to them, crying: "Messieurs, since you have turned our stag for us, you are our friends." And he bowed to Mme de Rochefort.

"Monsieur," said the Count in German, "if you will permit me I will make the formal introductions a little later. The reverend Father and this lady are French."

"Oh, French!" said the gentleman, with enthusiasm. "That is enough for me." And he bowed again to Mme de Rochefort, crying, "On with the hunt, Madame."

The Countess rode off beside him with the two others close behind. The servants let them pass and followed at a little distance, taking care not to lose sight of them. They rode in this way for an hour or so, while the steeples of Passau gradually faded in the distance. Then suddenly a great burst of laughter echoed from the followers, rising above even the music of the hounds. "The stag is going Bavarian," someone cried. Obviously this was a familiar joke among the hunting folk of the neighbourhood, for everyone repeated it laughingly.

Just ahead of them was a small stream; the stag plunged into it and made for the further bank. He managed to reach it, but only just; he was closely followed by the hounds and the horsemen. With his back to a tree he stood at bay. The hounds snapped at him and he lunged at them with his antlers; then one of them caught him by the throat and he belled his despair. The stout gentleman slipped behind him and struck with his hunting-knife; the stag fell to his knees.

"Death!" cried two or three voices.

Laughter and shouts of triumph broke out and the huntsmen sounded the death. Count Korfanty made the introductions and while bows were exchanged the master severed the stag's foot and offered it to Mme de Rochefort.

Then with a wide gesture of hospitality the old gentleman invited the whole company to dine at his castle, a few miles away.

"Unfortunately, we are unable to accept," said Eon, "I have come from St. Petersburg, Monsieur, and although you see me dressed in this incongruous way, I carry despatches from the Empress of Russia to the King of France. I cannot delay even one night."

Count Korfanty translated into German, and the faces of the horsemen fell, for they realized that the charming Frenchwoman would go with her friends and they would lose her company. But they bowed politely as Count Korfanty went up to the Chevalier. "At least, Monsieur," he said, "you can spare a quarter of an hour?"

Eon bowed. "I am at your disposal."

The horsemen understood what was happening and were

filled with excitement at the idea of a duel under the eyes of a pretty woman. All eyes were fixed on Mme de Rochefort, for they sensed that she must in some way or other be the cause of the duel. The Countess had grown pale as the adversaries bowed to her. Eon had taken the sword of Heart's Delight, and a good officer's sword it was, both strong and supple, for in such matters Heart's Delight was a connoisseur. Two of the horsemen, one of whom was the stout nobleman who had invited them to his castle, left the others to act as seconds. In a clearing close at hand the two men took off their coats. Eon was much smaller than his opponent and had a shorter reach. The stout gentleman sighed, and said to his neighbour: "I have heard of Korfanty. He is a fighting Hungarian who fought twenty duels at Pressburg when he was serving in the Queen's Dragoons. We shall have to hand over the dead body of a charming Frenchman to our Bavarian neighbours. 'This is a bad way to end a day's hunting."

And in a voice which shook a little he addressed himself to the duellists. "Messieurs," he said, "you are men of honour and you know better than I why you must cross swords. But, in the name of God, if there is any possibility of reconciling you, may I offer my services of arbiter?"

Count Korfanty translated this in an expressionless voice, but with a sardonic twitch of his mouth which showed his feelings clearly enough.

"Monsieur," answered Eon. "I thank you for your offer, but I have given my word to this gentleman."

"And I, Monsieur," said the Hungarian, "am of the opinion that the lady who is waiting for us over there can only be escorted to Versailles by one or the other of us, and that it would be preferable that he should be myself."

"Very well, Messieurs, so be it," said the old gentleman. "And may God judge between you."

The two men crossed swords. It was not a long fight. From the beginning those who were expert in fencing could see that Eon was a master of the art and that no superiority of reach would outweigh the subtlety and skill which all his movements revealed. Standing his ground firmly, he parried every attack by his opponent without difficulty, while all the time he

menaced him with his own. The Hungarian had not expected to meet anything like this. He had thought that he would dispose of his enemy by one swift lunge and come out of the business at little or no expense to himself. Both men were determined on reaching a decisive result. Neither of them would be satisfied with merely wounding the other in the arm, Korfanty because a mere wound would not prevent Eon from continuing his journey, and Eon because he wished not only to continue it, but to do so alone with the woman he loved.

"Parry this one," cried the Count feinting. Eon parried it easily with a laugh, and while his adversary was still taken aback he blocked his thrust and the Count's sword flew out of his hand. The two seconds cried out in surprise.

"That is a serious insult," said the Hungarian. Pale as death, he picked up his sword and hurled himself on the Chevalier. He seemed not to be keeping up a guard any more; his only object was to strike and to kill; his eyes were blazing and he was grimacing like a wild beast. Anyone but Eon must have lost heart and given ground before such a display of inhuman rage. But Eon merely drew back gradually two or three paces and then suddenly thrust aside his opponent's sword and lunged with his own. The other man fell upon the point of it and sank to the ground with a sigh.

The two seconds rushed forward. Count Korfanty had fallen on his face and they had some trouble in picking him up and propping him against a tree. In answer to their cries, everyone hurried to them. Mme de Rochefort was the first; she was as pale as death and her eyes were wide with terror. She could not restrain herself from smiling happily when she saw Eon standing erect, but her tender heart prompted her to kneel down at once beside the dying man. "My dear Count," she said, "keep up your courage. We will save you."

The Hungarian raised his hand. "What a pity," he said in a strange, weak voice, "that Monsieur is not really a priest. He could have given me absolution."

At a sign from him Eon knelt down in turn beside him. "Monsieur," he said, "you will bear witness that I have conducted myself as a man of honour."

The Hungarian bowed his head. He was already almost beyond speech. Then he took Mme de Rochefort and Eon by the hand and joined their hands together. "May you be happy," he whispered, and then, "*In manus tuas, Domine . . .*" And with that his head fell back and he died.



## CHAPTER XXIII

# Succeed or Die

MME DE POMPADOUR had sent for a certain M. de Valdrôme, a nobleman of great power but brutal behaviour, recently in disgrace. As he stood before her in an attitude of lofty pride, but with his head slightly bent and his hat under his arm, she explained to him that a certain messenger was approaching Versailles from St. Petersburg, and that she did not wish him to reach the Court.

"I have heard much of this person," said Valdrôme. "There is doubt whether it is a man or a woman."

"For the moment, Monsieur, we await the Chevalier d'Eon."

"Then he shall be buried as a Chevalier," said Valdrôme with a sardonic chuckle.

"I see we are agreed, Monsieur. And you pledge yourself to my service?"

"Without reservation, Madame."

"I am not quite sure," said the Marquise, meditatively, "with whom he is travelling; but I believe that the Countess de Rochefort, with whom it is said here that he was in love, must have joined him under an assumed name."

Valdrôme shrugged his shoulders. "I know the Countess," he said. "I had the honour of being presented to her at Versailles."

He did not add that he had paid the most marked attentions to Mme de Rochefort, who had snubbed him most effectively and gracefully, as she always had snubbed every such advance before her Cherub appeared on the scene.

"Her husband, who is on the way back from Spain, thinks that she is at a convent."

"I quite understand, Madame."

"The cards are in your hands, Monsieur. Success means

reinstatement at Versailles, forgiveness for the past, and my protection."

"The reward is ample, Madame. I hope"—his expression was that of a man who would stoop to any means to an end—"I hope that Mme de Rochefort will not prove to be an encumbrance to her companion, whether man or woman."

"If it is a woman, she would be of no use to the King, obviously," said Mme de Pompadour, "and if it is a man he could be dangerous."

Valdrôme could hardly be expected to understand the inner meaning of these enigmatic words, based as they were on a vivid memory of which he knew nothing; but he seized on the idea that the Marquise for some reason regarded Eon as a danger to her. And he knew that the fortune of the man who killed him was assured. The Marquise, watching him closely, saw his nostrils twitching like those of a wild animal about to charge.

"Whichever it may be, Madame, I will deal with the matter."

The Marquise's face lit up with satisfaction, and as she held out her thin blue-veined hand to be kissed she gave her final orders: "The Chevalier has been acting as the King's messenger; at the moment he is the messenger of the Empress of Russia. The letter which he is carrying is for His Majesty. You will give that letter to me, Monsieur, and I will be responsible for handing it to the King."

Valdrôme bowed. As he went out into the marble courtyard, where night had already fallen, he said aloud as he passed the sentry, "Male or female, my dogs shall eat the carcass."

Meanwhile the travellers had reached Bar-le-Duc. Eon recognized the hangman's house and told the story to the Countess with much laughter. They intended only to stay long enough to change horses, and even for this short stay they had done what they could to disguise the two servants with wigs and patches, certain that the police knew them only too well. Eon indeed had wanted to leave the two stout fellows in Germany with plenty of money in their pockets, but once they sniffed the air of France they could not resist it. Besides they felt that any man could hide among the crowds of Paris, and

once the Chevalier had seen and spoken to the King they would have their share in the rich fortune which undoubtedly awaited him.

But when Eon shouted for horses, and with no delay the innkeeper appeared, bowing and scraping, with the sad news that every horse in the place had been hired and paid for in advance by a man from the household of the Bishop of Strasbourg. In compensation he offered good food and good wine, but to all Eon's curses and demands that the man should be produced he could only answer that he was not at the moment to be found. Probably he was looking round the town—perhaps a pretty lady was in question; but assuredly he had been a man attached to a great house, he had paid in advance. What could a poor innkeeper do?

There was nothing for it but to go into the inn. The two servants tried to keep out of sight in a corner of the stable; but suddenly the innkeeper caught sight of Heart's Delight's face and uttered a cry of surprise. The servant at once clapped his hand over his mouth. "Be quiet, or you are a dead man."

"Oh, Heart's Delight," cried Master Turpin, "would you threaten your best friend? You must know well enough that I would never give you away. But what folly to come here. The hangman has his noose ready waiting for you, since the trick you played on him delighted the whole countryside and every little snotty-nosed, bare-arsed urchin makes fun of him for it."

The two men embraced one another and Heart's Delight and Bragard were hidden in an attic until they should leave in the morning.

Eon decided to reach Reims in one stage; it was only twenty-five miles to the frontier of Lorraine, where the Duke's writ ceased to run and they could breathe freely again. And as for horses, if the worst came to the worst, they would go on with the same mounts.

But when the time came a contrite innkeeper announced, "The man who was here yesterday has disappeared, and as for the Bishop of Strasbourg, I have not seen so much as the tail of his vestments. So all the horses in my stables are at your disposal."

Eon reflected that someone must deliberately have planned

to delay them for the night. But who could it have been? The idea of Mme de Pompadour never crossed his mind; he shrugged his shoulders and decided that it had been an unlucky accident.

At last the travellers were in their coach while the postilions drank their stirrup cups and the ostlers hung round hoping for a coin or two to be flung to them. A few people from the town had come to watch the departure, listen to the cracking of the whips and exchange chaff with the serving-wenches leaning on their brooms. It was a typical scene of bustle in the great courtyard, with jokes and laughter and the ringing of the horses' bells as they shook themselves. But suddenly Master Turpin turned pale. Among the crowd he had seen a short, thickset woman with a hard face. "My God!" he muttered. "Mme Cornavin!"

Eon's two rascals could already be heard coming down from their attic. They had been warned not to mount their horses till the last moment. The innkeeper prayed that they still had their wigs and patches; they were indeed practically unrecognizable, and they passed through the crowd, in which were many men who had been drinking companions of Heart's Delight in old days, without anyone either looking curiously at his face or giving him a friendly tap on the shoulder. The innkeeper was beginning to relax and Eon was just about to give the order to start when suddenly there was a loud cry and a volley of abuse. Mme Cornavin had leapt on Heart's Delight and snatched off his wig and his patch.

"There he is, the ruffian, the miscreant, the sinner, the gallows-bird who cheated the gallows—there he is! Yes, it's you, M. Cornavin, my husband. It's you all right!"

"Madame," said Heart's Delight calmly, apparently much surprised, "I don't know you."

"You may not know me but everyone here knows you—and certainly the police do. Come on, call the police, the sergeants, the magistrates, the hangman. Above all the hangman."

"Madame," he repeated, "I don't know you."

But unfortunately everybody knew and recognized Heart's Delight. And everybody knew how vengeful Mme Cornavin was, and how every night for the past year she had gone to see

if the gibbet was still in place, hoping, it seemed, to find her husband hanging there at last one day. On every hand one heard shouts: "It's him." "It's Heart's Delight." "How are you, Heart's Delight?" "Look out for yourself, Heart's Delight. They'll hang you." "They'll burn you alive." "They'll tear out your guts."

Children swarmed like a cloud of gnats. The business of the hanging had made the Barrois laugh for a year, and there was not a child, boy or girl, who did not want to see and touch Heart's Delight.

"Be quiet, Madame Cornavin," said the innkeeper. "You are annoying this gentleman." He pointed to Eon and signed to him to start. But Eon was not willing to leave Heart's Delight in the clutches of his wife.

"I have no quarrel with this gentleman," she cried. "It's that rascal I'm after. First of all I have a nice piece of news for you. Your fancy bit, Jeanette, has died in the hospital. There's something to warm your heart. As for you—no hospital for you. The noose—yes, the noose for M. Cornavin."

"Humph!" said the innkeeper as he watched the crowd gathering. "This is going to be troublesome for you, Heart's Delight."

Just then a gentleman rode up and shouted for someone to hold his horse, but all the servants were taken up with the wrangle. Bragard offered himself at once and as the gentleman joined the crowd of onlookers he patted the horse and led it into the street, making a sign to his friend as he went. He was just in time, for now the crowd was making way for a group of soldiers, led by the same Superintendent of Police who had been so rudely jostled the year before at the foot of the gallows. "Where is the ruffian?" he shouted. Then, "Shut the gates!"

Heart's Delight was caught; or would have been if Nature had not made him in the image of a cat, with a vigour and agility which had already made his exploits famous in several kingdoms. When he saw the Superintendent he felt the noose tightening round his neck, and, leaving a piece of his shirt in his wife's hands, he rushed upstairs to the attic. Once there, he squeezed through the skylight and, in a second, reached the roof. It was an easy drop from the low roof to the ground on

the street side, where Bragard was waiting with the horse. The Superintendent and the soldiers were still trampling about on the staircase or in the courtyard as he climbed over the roof, and the crowd who filled the street had scarcely time to shout "There he is!" when he reached the ground. Then, with one bound, he was in the saddle. The big gates were thrown open at that moment and the soldiers could be seen pushing the crowd aside. There was a tremendous shout as Heart's Delight rode off at full speed and turned the corner safely in spite of the random shots fired at him.

"Why was this criminal allowed to get away?" asked the Superintendent.

The innkeeper protested that it was he who had sent word to the authorities. Then the policeman turned on Eon. "He was one of your men," he said accusingly.

Eon was not at all anxious to show his letter and announce that he was the King's messenger, especially since the way they had been forcibly delayed in Bar-le-Duc made him feel vaguely uneasy.

"One takes one's servants where one can find them," he answered. "I should be very sorry, Monsieur, to obstruct the Duke's justice. Please take my carriage; it will hold three people and I will take you as fast as you wish. Some of these gentlemen"—indicating the soldiers—"can follow on horseback. The fellow will have to be very cunning if he is to escape us."

The Superintendent scratched his head. "The trouble is that my authority is limited to the Barrois . . ."

"Well, it's a long way to the frontier. Let us hurry."

"As for me," said Bragard, the hypocrite, making great pretence of ferocity, "I want to win the reward of a hundred crowns."

"I thought I recognized you as one of his friends," muttered Mme Cornavin.

"Me?" cried Bragard, "Why, my dear woman, if I only had him here with an axe and a block handy, I'd soon off with his head."

She jumped up behind him on the saddle like a she-wolf jumping on her prey and off they went in a bunch with the gentleman who had lost his horse and several soldiers behind

them. Poor Bragard was horrified at having to carry this fury who kept shouting in his ear: "I want to see him hang! I will see him hang!"

"As fast as you can go," cried Eon to the postilions. "Fifty crowns if you catch him." He knew his man; if Heart's Delight were too hard pressed he would be cunning enough to give them the slip somehow. So they drove for twenty-five miles, changing horses twice. At each stop a man, apparently in both cases a servant of a great house, came and poked his nose in at the window of the carriage in the most insolent way, as if to find out who was inside, and then rode off. Eon did not rebuke either of these impudent fellows at the time, for he was afraid of upsetting Mme de Rochefort, but to himself he reflected that they were travelling through a network of spies. If he had been alone he would have faced the danger with enthusiasm, but he was anxious for the beloved creature who leant against him in the back of the carriage and whom he dared not embrace because of the absurd presence of the police officer.

After the second stop he knew that Heart's Delight could no longer have much of a lead, for as he had no money he would not have been able to get a fresh horse. Sure enough, after another couple of miles, they could see him in the distance, pushing his horse desperately, but still loosing ground. Then, as they came to the first houses of Ligny-en-Mareuil, the Superintendent shouted, "Stop! For God's sake, stop! Beyond this point I have no authority."

"But I am ready to go all the way to Paris," shouted the gentleman.

"And I right to Versailles," cried Mme Cornavin.

Suddenly, Heart's Delight, fifty yards or so ahead of them in the main street of the village, jumped from his horse and turning it to face his pursuers, sent it trotting back to them. Its master shed tears of happiness, but Mme Cornavin shouted, "It's not the horse we went to catch. It's the man." And to the policeman she added, "Are you going to let him get away?"

"Once past this barrier," said that functionary, "I can do no more. Ligny is not in the Barrois." And with a low bow he added, "Address yourself, Mme Cornavin, to the magistrates of His Majesty the King of France."

"Devil take your kings and your dukes," said she. "May they all perish miserably."

"Who is it that speaks so insolently of kings and dukes?" asked a severe voice.

Eon turned quickly. Valdrôme stood before him.



## CHAPTER XXIV

# The Duel

VALDRÔME BEGAN TO laugh, and the more he laughed the more he seemed to like the sound of his own laughter, which filled the street and rose to Heaven. It was the laughter of a happy man, such as he used when the stag at last stood at bay, ready to fight to the death. Then suddenly he stopped. "I thought you were a woman," he said to the Chevalier.

Eon recognized three men who were with him, Hauchecorne, des Chesneaux and Rauville, swashbucklers all, of bad repute. A little behind them were a dozen or so huntsmen and flunkeys, fingering their hunting knives and staves. But Eon was not the man to be intimidated by such a gang as that.

"I think, monsieur, that you need a lesson in sword-play. You shall have it—be sure of that."

"From a priest? That would be a good joke!"

"Monsieur," said Mme de Rochefort appearing suddenly at the door of the coach, "I beg you to allow me to continue my journey without hindrance."

Valdrôme bowed. "Madame, I knew that you were here. I am happy to have the opportunity to pay my respects to you, and you are quite free to continue your journey. One of my friends, Baron de Hauchecorne, will escort you as far as Reims. As far as the Convent of the Canonesses," he added with a smile, while Mme de Rochefort blushed. "But, as for this gentleman—this gentleman or lady, whichever it may be—he will stay here. I have an account to settle with him, and inasmuch as I have never been beaten by stag or by wild boar, so much less will I be beaten by a priest."

Mme de Rochefort laid her hand on Eon's arm. "I wish . . ." she began, but Valdrôme interrupted her rudely, "Madame, your wishes should be my orders if I had not already more powerful orders to follow."

"The orders of Mme de Pompadour," thought Eon. And

suddenly he saw the whole thing clearly. "Of course she is determined to get rid of Conti, and I am Conti's man. I imagine that they are going to stage a murder to look like a duel. Then Valdrôme will take my letter to Paris. Perhaps he may even find the wretched Douglas at Versailles and join forces with him against me. What a fool I have been not to attach more importance to the Pompadour's tricks. Obviously she does not want ever to see again the man who . . ." The scene on the sofa was vivid in his memory. "She is afraid of an indiscretion. She will not be satisfied till either I am dead or in the Bastille."

Meanwhile Valdrôme, without looking at Eon, went nearer to Mme de Rochefort and said, "Perhaps it would be as well, Madame, if you lost no time in seeking out the Convent at Reims. I was told in Versailles that a certain M. de Rochefort is on his way home. He would be heartbroken to find you missing and to hear that you had gone off to somewhere or other in Germany."

Mme de Rochefort could not bring herself to speak. Eon felt the coldness of her hand in his. He searched for an insult to hurl at Valdrôme and could not find one bad enough. "I must kill him," he thought. "That is the only answer."

Meanwhile Valdrôme raised his voice. "Get down, Monsieur. I do not like masqueraders."

"And I," said Eon as he got out of the coach, "I do not care for clowns."

Valdrôme turned pale with rage. "So you do not wish to leave the matter there. You shall be accommodated."

"In your den, I suppose? Among your hunting friends, with odds of five to one?"

"Monsieur," said Valdrôme, paler than ever, "it is true that at first I meant to deal with you with my knife, as I would with a wild boar. But I will do you the honour of using my sword to kill you."

"My answer to that is ready," said Eon.

"Very well. Let us leave the village and go into the woods. It smells far too much of the dung-heap here. I have never killed a priest yet; it will be a new pleasure."

Eon turned to Mme de Rochefort. "Madame," he said, "I

beg you to leave without further delay. You have suffered enough already. I wish to spare you the rest."

"Chevalier, do not think of such a thing. It is the rest with which I am concerned above all."

"Madame is right," said Valdrôme. "All that has gone before is but an *hors-d'œuvre*. Your death, Monsieur, is to be the main dish."

"The man is a monster," thought Eon. "And if by any chance he were to kill me he would be quite capable of carrying off the Countess and raping her. Whatever happens, I must kill him."

He glanced round him. Heart's Delight, once more destined to be hanged, was bound; Bragard, standing with his arms folded between two servants who never took their eyes off him, could only throw his master a look of despair.

"I am at your service, Monsieur," said Eon. He turned and smiled at the Countess, who was standing, clutching her skirt with trembling hands and gazing sorrowfully at him. Then he drew his sword.

The two men faced one another in a circle of old trees, whose twisted branches lent a touch of fantasy to the scene. Between the trees one could see the shining eyes of the peasants who had fallen strangely silent. Valdrôme's three friends and ten or twelve servants formed a circle round the duellists, a circle broken only by the presence of Mme de Rochefort.

Valdrôme had suddenly made up his mind to the duel, but the only object of this violent, bloodthirsty man, full of bitter hatred, was to kill the other. And now he asked himself if he had not been a fool to have recourse to this honourable method of killing, impelled to it by some vague tradition of chivalry which still remained in his nature. He remembered the stories of Eon's prowess, and even as he took in the bright eyes, the sensitive mouth, the straight, slender nose, he felt that he was fighting a man. "I should have let my men kill him in the shelter of the wood," he thought. "We could have blamed it on highwaymen."

Suddenly Hauchecorne called out to him, "Take care, Valdrôme. Suppose it is a woman, after all?"

Valdrôme hesitated; he seemed to be undressing Eon with

his eyes. "Monsieur . . ." he said in a doubtful voice. It was as if he said, "I must know. . . ."

"Monsieur," answered Eon, "permit me to observe that you have a sword before you. Try to keep hold of your own skewer, and let us leave it at that."

With that Valdrôme rushed at him, but after the first trial of strength he calmed down and restrained himself from engaging too closely. Three attacks followed, hard fought, and on Valdrôme's side as furiously as possible. The Baron's physical strength was incontestably superior, and he thought that by using it he would easily wear down his opponent. Suddenly he lunged; he found empty air before him, and a second later the point of Eon's sword was against his chest.

His three friends jumped forward in horror. But already the Chevalier had driven his sword home and now he was withdrawing quickly with his weapon still in his hand, while his enemy had fallen face downward on the ground. Hauchecorne and the others rushed to their friend. Mme de Rochefort, pale as death, came to the side of Eon, who could already feel the knives of Valdrôme's servants at his back, and touched him on the shoulder. "Come, Chevalier," she said.

But the circle was already closing round them and Eon felt that he was going to be murdered. Then the wounded man made a gesture towards them. "Out of the way!" he said in a strangled voice. The group round them stood aside and Eon had just time to see the wounded man half-lying on the grass, half-leaning against the trunk of a tree, a pistol in his hand. Then a slender form threw itself on his chest. He heard a shot and Mme de Rochefort collapsed in his arms. "Murderer!" he cried.

He no longer had eyes for anyone but her; he was quite heedless of the risk that death might come to him at any moment. She had raised her hand to her breast; her mouth had fallen open and she seemed no longer able to breathe. He laid her gently on the grass and, kneeling beside her, called her name and begged her to answer him. But all she could do was to look at him and smile. Finally, with a tremendous effort she managed to whisper, "My Cherub."

At that moment Hauchecorne came up and said, "The poor devil is dead."

Eon made no answer; he merely indicated by a movement the young woman in his arms. Her lips still wore the shadow of a smile; her head was at peace against his shoulder; she too seemed to be dead, a few feet away from the man who had killed her.

The coach made a frantic dash to Reims, burning up the stages. Eon, in despair, could do no more, in the tragic gloom of a stormy night, than hand over to the canonesses of Buzemont a body almost drained of blood, speak of a hunting accident in Baron de Valdrôme's company and watch, himself scarcely alive, the long-drawn suffering of this other half of all his being.

For hour after hour he had not quitted the room where Mme de Rochefort lay without seeing him, without hearing him, surrounded by all the doctors and surgeons of the place, who did nothing but shake their heads in despair. The Empress's letter was an unbearable burden to him. Sometimes he thought of handing it to the first person who came by and begging him to go with it to the King. No one among the great men of the district would refuse, he thought. Anyone would be glad to have such an opportunity of making his name at Court. For himself, he would spend the rest of his life here, in a peasant's hovel, near the grave of his beloved. At other times he reflected that probably M. de Rochefort would soon appear on the scene. Why not let himself be killed by him? Eon thought this idea over seriously. "He will challenge me," he said to himself, "and I will accept the challenge. Then I will turn my sword aside and fall upon the point of his." The thought that in such case he too would be buried in a little country graveyard, under the walls of the convent, soothed his troubled mind. Heart's Delight and Bragard could do nothing to help; Eon no longer seemed to recognize them. With his eyes streaming with tears, he refused to leave the dying woman, who had already received the last sacraments; he spoke to her, smiled at her, poured out a flood of tender words over her beloved body. So the hours went by, echoing always to this mournful monologue, carried on in a low but passionate voice.

Then, on the second day, the Mother Superior came to him. She led him into the garden and sat down beside him on a little wall under the shade of the yew trees, a few feet away from the spot where to-morrow, he knew, Mme de Rochefort's grave would be dug.

The Reverend Mother came from one of the leading families of the nobility in Champagne. She had been very much of the world, and retired to this solitary life as the result of an unhappy love affair; but her name assured her the privileges of leadership, even here. She signed to the Chevalier not to interrupt her, and addressed him in these words: "Monsieur le Chevalier, your servants have told me who you are and where you come from. What I am taking it upon myself to say is said in the name of the woman whom you already mourn; her mother was my dearest friend. It is your duty not to bring dishonour on her name. Her husband must not find you here when he comes to look for his wife. That alone should be sufficient reason for you to go, but if it is not, I must allow myself to appeal to your feelings as a loyal subject. When one has had the honour of being entrusted with a mission by the greatest King in the world, and the further honour of being chosen as a secret messenger by another sovereign, one has no right to hand over to another the charge which has been entrusted to one, nor to fail to complete one's mission by hastening to the King."

Eon raised his head and looked at her.

"Do you imagine, Monsieur le Chevalier," she went on, "that you are the only person on earth whose heart has been broken?" She looked at him with the pitying sympathy born of a suffering shared in equal degree.

"Madame," answered Eon, "I see clearly that I must leave this place, where I had hoped to die. You are right. If I am to let myself be killed, it must be by another hand than M. de Rochefort's. But I beg you to realize that if this terrible misfortune which threatens me comes to pass—and how can it not come to pass?—I shall be alone in the world for evermore."

"If you were a different man, I would answer—there is always God; but I do not think that you were made for a recluse."

"I was made for death," said Eon gloomily.

"No, Chevalier, you were made for life," she said, putting her hand on his arm, "for life with your great love, if God allows it, and if not then with your great memory. After all, is it nothing to have been so loved?"

"Oh, Madame!" he cried out with the violence of despair.

She rose, and he stood gazing at her, trembling and clenching his fists in his misery.

"What do you know of the future, Chevalier?" she said, touching him lightly on the shoulder. "Do your duty and trust in God."

## CHAPTER XXV

# A Whiff of Versailles

AN HOUR LATER, he was gone. From Reims to Paris he spoke no word at all. Every now and then the servants who rode behind him drew level with the carriage and looked inside. All they could see was the Chevalier huddled in the corner, motionless and dumb. When they changed horses Eon took the merest mouthful of food, drank a glass of wine and shut himself up in his brooding silence. At night he paced up and down his bedroom at the inn till he was exhausted; then he flung himself on the bed fully dressed and booted, and tossed in a feverish sleep till dawn broke. He had succeeded in his mission, but he had lost the woman he loved. What was the good of life to him now? Certainly the Mother Superior was right; he must make his report to the King and to the Prince de Conti. No one must know anything about his love, and no one should. Then he would ask for a company of dragoons or would go back to Russia; but God help anyone who crossed his path! His grief turned to rage; he hated all humanity.

"Here I am again!" sighed Eon. They were the first words he had spoken since he left Reims. The carriage was bumping through the narrow streets of the Temple Quarter; on the left Eon had a glimpse of the pointed tower and its four turrets; two more turnings and they stopped before Conti's palace.

It was the time of day when, as Eon knew well, the Prince would be sitting alone in his study, composing his speeches or writing his sonnets. Covered as he was with the dust of travel, the Chevalier burst into the anteroom, and his entrance was like the dropping of a bomb. In a flash the Swiss guard drew himself to attention and the servants bowed deeply. They had none of them forgotten the fight with Beauvallon, and in any case the Chevalier's look could not fail to command respect.

In two minutes he was bowing before the Prince, who came



to meet him with open arms and a smile on his face, crying, "Well, well, and who can this be?"

Eon stopped short. "Excellency!" he said with another deep bow, "the appearance is that of a priest, but I beg Your Highness to believe that beneath the appearance there is still a soldier."

"I am very glad to hear it," murmured the Prince, "but that is not what they say in Paris."

"Which means, Excellency—at least if anyone says it to my face—that by to-night or to-morrow His Majesty will have several subjects the less."

The Prince smiled indulgently; then he added, "The Chevalier Douglas is here."

"Where else could the good man be? As soon as he got to Russia they showed him the door."

"Ha! ha!" laughed the Prince. "That's not his way of putting it. He says that his companion spoiled everything."

"That, Excellency," said Eon, "is something about which you should ask Count Voronzov, the Vice-Chancellor, or even Her Majesty the Empress—and I doubt if the Chevalier Douglas is on intimate terms with either of them. But, in any case"—and he drew Elizabeth's letter from his wallet—"here is a personal letter from Her Majesty of Russia to His Majesty of France. I wished my patron"—he bowed again—"to be the first to know of its existence, though not of its contents, for it is sealed. And you will observe that M. le Chevalier Douglas is not the bearer of it."

Conti jumped to his feet. "Upon my word, Chevalier, you have played the ace of trumps, and I am grateful to you for taking me into your confidence. This indeed is something which will advance you in the King's favour."

"Your Highness does not think then that I have lost his favour?"

Conti shrugged his shoulders. "I see I must tell you the truth. Everyone at Court is wrangling about you, except the King and the Marquise. When the subject comes up, the Marquise purses her lips and the King says, 'He is a man. I would stake my life on that.'"

In spite of his misery, Eon laughed drily. He thought that

each of them had their own good reasons for knowing the truth.

Conti by now was on fire with enthusiasm. "Get ready to wait upon the King. I myself would like to take you to him."

In his lodging in the Rue de Buci, du Barry was just waking up. He heard a great noise of boots and swords, laughter and oaths, and the whole band, still inseparable, burst in on him—Lauraguais, Sainte-Foy, Dampierre and Besenval.

"Get up, you lazy devil," cried Lauraguais.

"Do you know why we have come to rescue you from your fleas?" asked Dampierre, and when du Barry shook his head, "Then you must be drunk," said Sainte-Foy. "But I'll tell you. To-morrow, carnival begins."

"To-morrow—as soon as that?"

"Yes, to-morrow, on the word of a Swiss. And to-morrow evening there is the King's fancy-dress ball, as usual. We've no idea at all of what to go in. What about you?"

Du Barry shook his head again.

"You're getting old," said Lauraguais.

Without answering, du Barry opened a bottle and began to look for glasses. But his friends were already helping themselves to whatever they could find on the sideboard.

Du Barry sighed, "What we miss . . ." he began.

And the chorus answered with one voice, "Is Eon!"

"Our Chevalier."

"You mean our Chevalière."

All four of them began to cackle like so many hens. For, since Eon had gone off in his woman's dress, these scatter-brains, and even du Barry himself, thought that the riddle was solved. They had decided that the mystification of the Court had taken place, not on the day of the fancy-dress ball, but long before that; all that had happened on that famous and never-to-be-forgotten night was that Eon had at last acknowledged her real sex. All his friends and acquaintances, with du Barry in the forefront, notable seducers of women that they were, were furious when they thought how long they had been fooled.

"By the way, du Barry," said one of the friends, "what happened last year in the private rooms behind our backs?"

"Did the Pompadour find she had bought a pig in a poke?" asked Lauraguais.

"Or was it the King?" persisted Besenval. "You have never breathed a word to us about it."

Now what had exercised du Barry's mind was that a week after this adventure he had been paid the sixty thousand pistoles promised him by Lebel, and that when that gentleman had slipped the money into his hand he had said, "The King was delighted." And what was he to make of that?

Sipping his wine, he said slowly, "If you want to know my opinion, I tell you Eon is a woman. A woman—yes, a female straight as any flatfish if you like, but still as female as our mother Eve. And we were very simple-minded to go to such pains to find a pretty woman into whose arms we could throw our Chevalier. The pretty woman would have been very much surprised, very much indeed and bitterly disappointed. As the Marquis d'Hospital says, it is the *terza gamba* which is missing."

"That's it. That's the word," they all cried, roaring with laughter and slapping one another on the back as they savoured the joke.

"A little trollop is our Eon," remarked one of them.

"She went to look for someone to tickle her in St. Petersburg."

"She will come back with a brat."

"Unless she went there to hide a bastard of the King's making."

Finally, Besenval, who, good Swiss that he was, was a little less given to jumping to conclusions, raised his voice: "Tell me, du Barry, on your word of honour, have you had her?"

Du Barry hesitated a moment. "No," he said. "But I swear that if I get the chance, I will."

And they all shouted happily together, "We all will! All of us! Good God, why doesn't she come back? Why doesn't someone bring her to us. It is only what we deserve. We will take her to La Bordas. . . ."

Suddenly a silence fell. The door had creaked. But no one had scratched or knocked on it. It was opening slowly by itself, with the sinister deliberation of a thing which threatened death to mortal man.

"What's this?" du Barry got up and pulled open the door.

"You were speaking about me, messieurs?" said the Chevalier d'Eon.

The first reaction of them all was a cry of astonishment. Then they hurled themselves on him, obviously with the most friendly intentions. But Eon raised his hand. "Excuse me. If I am a woman, a female as you were saying, keep your paws off me, if you please."

They recognized the dry, cutting voice of which they had always stood in awe, and they grimaced uneasily as they looked at one another.

"You swore to have me, didn't you? Wasn't that what you said, du Barry? It was a filthy thing to say, but if you deny it you are a coward."

Du Barry tried to make himself heard.

"Silence, my friend. My first sword-thrust shall be for you."

"That is not a nice thing to say," piped Lauraguais in his offhand manner; "especially to someone who apparently won you the King's favour."

Lauraguais felt it necessary to justify his reputation for insolence. He looked round at the others with a self-satisfied smile.

"Nice or not nice," said Eon, "will you allow me, Lauraguais, to reserve the second place for you?"

"Pooh! Don't let us have any scenes," said Sainte-Foy. "You're a priest. That's enough for us. By definition a priest has no sex, like an angel."

"Very well, Sainte-Foy, you can have the third chance to settle matters with the angel."

Dampierre, who was standing at the sideboard with his back turned, muttered as he poured out a glass of wine, "What a braggart you are!"

"I will put you fourth on the list, Dampierre!"

Dampierre threw his glass on the floor and shattered it. Besenval, the prudent member, clapped his hand over his friend's mouth, but not in time to stop him shouting, "Are we going to let ourselves be insulted by a . . ."

But Eon turned to Besenval, "And you, my brave Switzer, what have you to say?"

Besenval made an effort to be witty. "Well, it seems that you

are just back from Russia. Help us solve our problem. Did you sleep with Elizabeth or with her lover?"

"Neither with one nor the other. You shall be fifth and last on the list, Besenval. Messieurs, I am sure the Church will forgive me the irregularity of fighting in churchman's garb. Have you swords, du Barry?"

They looked at one another; courtiers that they were, none of them carried anything but ceremonial swords. But du Barry pointed silently to a duelling sword hanging on the wall.

"Good. I have my own," said Eon. "We will fight here."

"That is not done," exclaimed one of them. "Let us go to the Cours de la Reine."

"I am in a hurry," said Eon. "What patient, discreet fellows you have become. But you were talking about making love to me. Well, come along! The first man who disarms me shall have me."

Du Barry shrugged his shoulders. The business had taken a nasty turn, and he knew his Eon well enough to feel that he was already a dead man.

Nonchalantly, affecting a great air of contempt and boredom, he took his guard.

"The fortune-teller deceived me," he said to himself. "I shall never be any such thing as the master of the King's mistress." But the point of honour overrules all else, and du Barry, in spite of his low habits, was a gentleman. The table and chairs were pushed against the walls and there was silence in the room except for the clash of swords, which made their hearts beat faster. After a few exchanges Eon's rapier pinked his opponent in the cheek. Du Barry gave a cry of pain and threw down his sword. "Oh, to the Devil with you!" he said. "Kill me if you like. I have had enough."

Eon smiled, "Kill you? What good would that do anyone?" And then in a peremptory voice he called: "Lauraguais!"

Lauraguais, furiously angry, took his friend's place. He was a better swordsman than du Barry—in fact, he was the only one of the gang who had any sort of chance against Eon. Keeping himself well covered, he waited patiently for an opening and at one moment he had all their hearts in their mouths, for, staking everything on the chance, he lunged twice in quick

succession, forcing Eon to break away. But when he tried the well-known trick of the Neapolitan fencing masters in which the duellist literally passes under his adversary's arm, with his left hand resting on the ground, he found the Chevalier's sword pointing at his eyes, and, putting his hand to his temple, he drew it back red with blood. "He's very nearly put my eye out!" he cried.

The third man, Sainte-Foy, stood up silently. They were all quiet now except for the groaning of the two wounded men. The others looked somewhat pale. There was nothing more in the fight now; it was merely a form of execution, for which the two remaining victims were preparing themselves, Dampierre with a suppressed rage and a flow of insults which had no effect whatever on Eon's self-control, and Besenval with the half-smile of a well-bred man who finds the trick which has been played on him abominable, but still rather amusing.

When the five men were all marked and were dabbing at their bleeding faces in sullen silence, Eon wiped his sword clean on the curtains with an insolent smile, and as he pushed it back into its sheath he said, "Well, so no one wants the Chevalière after all? What a pity!"

"We will dispense with the Minister and his secretaries and go straight to the King," had been Conti's last words. After leaving du Barry's house, Eon picked up a cavalry officer's uniform at a second-hand shop. It was not difficult, merely a question of paying the man fifty crowns and leaving the priest's clothes in his grasping claws. Conti's valet had done the rest. But just as Eon was settling into his new clothes with a sigh of contentment, with his sword by his side and his dragoon's expression once more on his face, Conti burst into the room.

"Listen, Vatout. You must undress the Chevalier again," he cried to the valet.

"Don't you realize, Chevalier, that it is carnival time? The King is full of curiosity. As a loyal subject, you cannot refuse to gratify it. He is so pleased at your success that he wants to see you just as you were when you got to St. Petersburg. I am afraid we shan't succeed, even with the help of all the maids in the house, in reproducing the masterpiece of charm which Mme de Rochefort produced for us last year. Our poor Mine

de Rochefort, by the way. I hear she has been very near death after some mysterious hunting accident. But come along. It is a question of complying with the whim of the greatest King in the world."

At the mention of Mme de Rochefort's name Eon gave a sigh, but he was determined that his intrigue with the charming lady should remain the deepest of secrets, at any rate as far as Paris and Versailles were concerned. He steadied his voice and merely answered that he was at the service of the King and of His Excellency. No doubt in his inmost soul he felt humiliated, but by this time he had become so accustomed to changing his appearance at any moment that this violent argument over breeches or petticoats which drove men and women to frenzy left him altogether cold. So he gave himself up to the women's attentions without a word and little by little, as he put on his petticoat and the rest—while in his mind a voice kept saying, "No one will ever call me 'Cherub' again"—he found himself becoming once more that curious being, a woman with all the gestures and graces of a woman and yet with a man's heart and a man's will. It was a privileged position from which the enemy could be deceived and all kinds of risks could be taken.

Back in this personality, Eon felt that he could behave like a woman, and, throwing himself into Mme de Boufflers' arms, he whispered in her ear; "My God, Madame, what was His Highness saying just now about Mme de Rochefort? Can she be dead? Alas! she used to call me her Cherub."

Mme de Boufflers gave a little chuckle and, whispering in her turn into his ear, she said, "No, no, Chevalier. Take heart. She was dying yesterday of a bullet fired by some clumsy fellow, but when out of pity and the desire to let her die in peace the surgeons were forbidden to touch her, just think, the hæmorrhage stopped of its own accord and she has suffered no more than a good dose of the last rites. The Mother Superior is quite sure she is out of danger. We shall see the dear thing again soon, Chevalier."

So saying, Mme de Boufflers could not resist the temptation to hug Eon just a little too tenderly; and he for his part kissed her hands, her cheeks and whatever of her he could reach,

without any evil intention, while Conti, doubled up with laughter, warned his mistress: "Be careful, Madame. The wasp has a sting in its tail."

An hour later, Eon, radiant with the immense relief which he had just experienced, found himself once more in the ante-room which he remembered so well. "The wheel has come full circle," he reflected. Conti had left him there while he went to find the King. The sofa was still between the two doors; the armchairs seemed silently to open their arms to him; the light blue satin was still as bright as ever. The only thing missing was the meal for two on the little table. Eon could not resist the temptation to sit down on the sofa, when suddenly, just as had happened a year before, he heard the little sound of a key turning in the lock, and a woman came in.

It was the Marquise, but not the angry woman of his memories; this was a mealy-mouthed Marquise, informally dressed, who came towards him with mincing steps and said with a toss of her head, "I see, Monsieur, that you are surveying your old battleground."

"Madame," said Eon, "is one not allowed, with all respect, to recollect a victory?"

And he made a movement towards her, prompted by nothing more than courtesy.

"Don't come near me, you monster!" said the Marquise with an urgency which was almost savage.

"She is not the least grateful to me for having provided her with the strangest adventure of her life," thought Eon. In any case, he had no wish to touch her. Mme de Rochefort's image was too vivid in his mind for him even to wish to act the part of suppliant.

So the Marquise and he gazed at each other from a distance each as cold as the other—she by temperament and policy and he by his devotion to another woman.

"Still playing at carnival, I see," she said in a flat voice which he thought held more than a hint of anger.

"His Majesty's orders, Madame. But it is the last time."

"They all say that!" she began to laugh, then suddenly fell serious again. "That dress is so useful for deceiving people."

Eon felt that she was scarlet under her make-up. "She has



never forgiven me," he thought. "Any other man would finish her off, and I know just how. It needs but a little brutality and a little patience and then to wait for the King, or perhaps a servant, to come on the scene." But the idea filled him with disgust. He felt on his eyelids the breath of his beloved, lying wounded far away, and he made a silent prayer to her for forgiveness.

But now Mme de Pompadour was talking again, "They say that Her Majesty of Russia is a very gay lady?"

"Jealousy!" thought Eon. The Marquise, like everyone else at the Court, knew of the distant passion which the Tsarina cherished for the King.

"Her Majesty of Russia," he answered, "is, Madame, the mistress of all the Russians in her Empire."

"That is well said. And of some Frenchmen as well, perhaps?"

Eon pretended astonishment and bowed without answering. The Marquise pointed to the wallet which the Chevalier carried under his arm. "Secrets?" she asked.

"I am only a messenger, Madame."

"Come, come," she said, clenching her little fists. "Only a messenger, indeed. What sort of story is that, Monsieur? You are the bearer of a letter. You are not ignorant of its contents."

"I am not, Madame."

"Very well, then. Can't you tell me?"

The King was the most secretive person in the world, and the Marquise knew that unless Eon told her something, once the letter was locked up in the royal archives she would never know any more about it.

For the first time since he had left what he believed to be Mme de Rochefort's deathbed, Eon might be said to be enjoying himself. Mme de Pompadour had found out the King's mistake about him, but the King had no notion of the Marquise's own error, the least suspicion of which would have meant the favourite's instant downfall. "Most men would hold that over her," said the Chevalier to himself, "and though I shan't say anything—at least to-day—this powerful lady is not quite sure about it and is shaking in her shoes. She would give a lot for me either to be dead or to turn myself into her pet monkey, with no idea in life but to serve her."

"Well?" repeated the Marquise with a hint of annoyance. While he bowed again for answer, she turned on her heel and, as he raised his head, he caught a glimpse over his shoulder of a menacing eye in a hard face. "There goes my chance of a fortune," he thought. But he was satisfied with himself.

In another quarter of an hour he was in the King's presence. Louis XV was sitting at his writing table just as he had been on the day when Eon's journey to Russia had been arranged. He looked at him with eager curiosity, but amiably enough. On the King's right, Mme de Pompadour, trying to give the impression that she had just happened to come in, was huddled in a chair, apparently feeling the cold. She too seemed terribly curious about Eon, but in her case she was acting the part. Conti was standing to the left of them. Now the first curtsy had to be made.

"Perfect," murmured the King.

Now came the second and the third. All was done with a nice mixture of modesty and self-assurance, and with an air of the humblest respect.

"You are really wonderful, Chevalier," said the King.

"I must be grateful for the compliment, Sire, but, officer that I am, my feelings are somewhat mixed."

The King made a gesture of amused sympathy. "You must confess, Madame," he said to Mme de Pompadour, inspecting Eon from all angles, "that everything is there. (Don't move, Chevalier.) Arms, neck, hair, and above all the carriage, the bearing."

"In any case," said Conti, "all the Court . . ."

"But I, as I stand here," said the King vigorously, while Eon stood motionless, "I believe—I really do believe that I might have let myself be taken in. . . ."

Eon never moved a muscle. "I hope," he said to himself, "that he will be grateful for my discretion."

Just then the Pompadour put in a final word of which Eon alone could grasp the full significance. "I must confess, Sire," she said, "that even a woman might be deceived."

"And yet," the King went on, "the Chevalier is the bravest of my cavalry officers. How strange Nature is." He lost himself for a moment in a dream of possible new pleasures. Then he

shook his head and sighed. "You must tell us all about it, Chevalier. You must have had so many adventures. . . ."

Eon bowed modestly without answering.

"Some with men, perhaps?" asked the King.

"Or with women?" Mme de Pompadour allowed herself to add, and the King laughed.

Eon replied in a calm voice, "I have carried out, under a disguise imposed upon me, the mission with which His Majesty was pleased to entrust me. The chance encounters are of little moment."

The Pompadour shut her eyes for a second and her eyelids fluttered. She knew who had been the victim of the first of these encounters.

"Now," said the King, and a slight look of boredom came over his face, "let us leave that for the moment and turn to serious matters. They say you have a letter for me?"

"From Her Majesty the Empress of All the Russias to His Majesty the King of France and of Navarre."

With yet another curtsy, Eon held out to the King the great emblazoned missive with its green seals unbroken. And, for good measure of respect, he presented it on the back of his hand.



## AN HISTORICAL NOTE

### *Chevalier d'Eon*

The historical forbear of the hero of this novel was the Chevalier d'Eon, a Captain of Dragoons, graduate in Law, political writer and agent, Chevalier de St. Louis, who was born in 1728. He was possessed of an almost girlish grace of appearance, and made a habit from his early years of dressing up as a woman. He put his experience of this disguise to use on a secret mission to Russia with which he was entrusted by Louis XV in 1755.

He was later sent on a mission to London. This embassy ended in disgrace, and he was exiled from France for the attempted murder of his successor. Soon after this, his contemporaries—who never knew for certain whether he was man or woman—officially decided that he was a woman; after which he never wore man's clothes, and called himself "Chevalière d'Eon." He continued, however, to make money by giving fencing displays—he was all his life a brilliant and redoubtable swordsman—and even in these he wore his long dresses.

He died in London in 1810, and the doctors then disclosed that he had a perfectly normal male body.

Chevalier d'Eon left a highly-coloured two-volume autobiography, and other works. He was painted, in woman's dress, by La Tour. He himself claimed to have been involved in amorous intrigue both with Mme de Pompadour and Elizabeth of Russia; in the latter case this is no less than probable. Certainly during his long life he was the constant prey of murderous enemies, outraged authorities, lampoon, libel and counter-intrigue; he was involved in bluff, counter-bluff, and plots both personal and political; and was much feared.

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